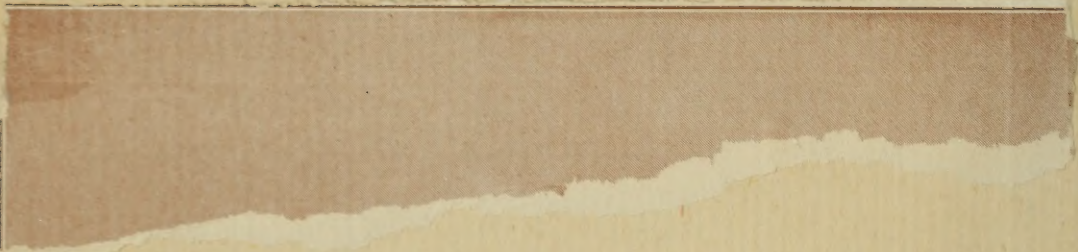




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EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE



THE  
BOOK OF ISAIAH #

CHAPTERS I. TO XLVIII. 0

BY  
ALEXANDER MACLAREN

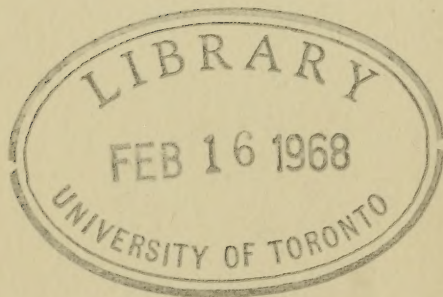
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## THE GREAT SUIT: JEHOVAH *VERSUS* JUDAH

'The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. 2. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me. 3. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. 4. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. 5. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. 7. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. 8. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. 9. Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah. . . . 16. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes; cease to do evil; 17. Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. 18. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow: though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. 19. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. 20. But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.'—ISAIAH i. 1-9; 16-20.

THE first bars of the great overture to Isaiah's great oratorio are here sounded. These first chapters give out the themes which run through all the rest of his prophecies. Like most introductions, they were probably written last, when the prophet collected and arranged his life's labours. The text deals with the three great thoughts, the *leit-motifs* that are sounded over and over again in the prophet's message.

First comes the great indictment (vs. 2-4). A true prophet's words are of universal application, even when they are most specially addressed to a particular audience. Just because this indictment was so true of

Judah, is it true of all men, for it is not concerned with details peculiar to a long-past period and state of society, but with the broad generalities common to us all. As another great teacher in Old Testament times said, 'I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt-offerings, to have been continually before me.' Isaiah has nothing to say about ritual or ceremonial omissions, which to him were but surface matters after all, but he sets in blazing light the foundation facts of Judah's (and every man's) distorted relation to God. And how lovingly, as well as sternly, God speaks through him! That divine lament which heralds the searching indictment is not unworthy to be the very words of the Almighty Lover of all men, sorrowing over His prodigal and fugitive sons. Nor is its deep truth less than its tenderness. For is not man's sin blackest when seen against the bright background of God's fatherly love? True, the fatherhood that Isaiah knew referred to God's relation to the nation rather than to the individual, but the great truth which is perfectly revealed by the Perfect Son was in part shown to the prophet. The east was bright with the unrisen sun, and the tinted clouds that hovered above the place of its rising seemed as if yearning to open and let him through. Man's neglect of God's benefits puts him below the animals that 'know' the hand that feeds and governs them. Some men think it a token of superior 'culture' and advanced views to throw off allegiance to God. It is a token that they have less intelligence than their dog.

There is something very beautiful and pathetic in the fact that Judah is not directly addressed, but that verses 2-4 are a divine soliloquy. They might rather be called a father's lament than an indictment. The

forsaken father is, as it were, sadly brooding over his erring child's sins, which are his father's sorrows and his own miseries. In verse 4 the black catalogue of the prodigal's doings begins on the surface with what we call 'moral' delinquencies, and then digs deeper to disclose the root of these in what we call 'religious' relations perverted. The two are inseparably united, for no man who is wrong with God can be right with duty or with men. Notice, too, how one word flashes into clearness the sad truth of universal experience—that 'iniquity,' however it may delude us into fancying that by it we throw off the burden of conscience and duty, piles heavier weights on our backs. The doer of iniquity is 'laden with iniquity.' Notice, too, how the awful entail of evil from parents to children is adduced—shall we say as aggravating, or as lessening, the guilt of each generation? Isaiah's contemporaries are 'a seed of evil-doers,' spring from such, and in their turn are 'children that are corrupters.' The fatal bias becomes stronger as it passes down. Heredity is a fact, whether you call it original sin or not.

But the bitter fountain of all evil lies in distorted relations to God. 'They have forsaken the Lord'; that is why they 'do corruptly.' They have 'despised the Holy One of Israel'; that is why they are 'laden with iniquity.' Alienated hearts separate from Him. To forsake Him is to despise Him. To go from Him is to go 'away backward.' Whatever may have been our inheritance of evil, we each go further from Him. And this fatherly lament over Judah is indeed a wail over every child of man. Does it not echo in the 'pearl of parables,' and may we not suppose that it suggested that supreme revelation of man's misery and God's love?

After the indictment comes the sentence (vs. 5-8). Perhaps 'sentence' is not altogether accurate, for these verses do not so much decree a future as describe a present, and the deep tone of pitying wonder sounds through them as they tell of the bitter harvest sown by sin. The penetrating question, 'Why will ye be still stricken, that ye revolt more and more?' brings out the solemn truth that all which men gain by rebellion against God is chastisement. The ox that 'kicks against the pricks' only makes its own hocks bleed. We aim at some imagined good, and we get—blows. No rational answer to that stern 'Why?' is possible. Every sin is an act of unreason, essentially an absurdity. The consequences of Judah's sin are first darkly drawn under the metaphor of a man desperately wounded in some fight, and far away from physicians or nurses, and then the metaphor is interpreted by the plain facts of hostile invasion, flaming cities, devastated fields. It destroys the coherence of the verses to take the gruesome picture of the wounded man as a description of men's sins; it is plainly a description of the consequences of their sins. In accordance with the Old Testament point of view, Isaiah deals with national calamities as the punishment of national sins. He does not touch on the far worse results of individual sins on individual character. But while we are not to ignore his doctrine that nations are individual entities, and that 'righteousness exalteth a nation' in our days as well as in his, the Christian form of his teaching is that men lay waste their own lives and wound their own souls by every sin. The fugitive son comes down to be a swine-herd, and cannot get enough even of the swine's food to stay his hunger.



The note of pity sounds very clearly in the pathetic description of the deserted 'daughter of Zion.' Jerusalem stands forlorn and defenceless, like a frail booth in a vineyard, hastily run up with boughs, and open to fierce sunshine or howling winds. Once 'beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, . . . the city of the great King'—and now!

Verse 9 breaks the solemn flow of the divine Voice, but breaks it as it desires to be broken. For in it hearts made soft and penitent by the Voice, breathe out lowly acknowledgment of widespread sin, and see God's mercy in the continuance of 'a very small remnant' of still faithful ones. There is a little island not yet submerged by the sea of iniquity, and it is to Him, not to themselves, that the 'holy seed' owe their being kept from following the multitude to do evil. What a smiting comparison for the national pride that is—'as Sodom,' 'like unto Gomorrah'!

After the sentence comes pardon. Verses 16 and 17 properly belong to the paragraph omitted from the text, and close the stern special word to the 'rulers' which, in its severe tone, contrasts so strongly with the wounded love and grieved pity of the preceding verses. Moral amendment is demanded of these high-placed sinners and false guides. It is John the Baptist's message in an earlier form, and it clears the way for the evangelical message. Repentance and cleansing of life come first.

But these stern requirements, if taken alone, kindle despair. 'Wash you, make you clean'—easy to say, plainly necessary, and as plainly hopelessly above my reach. If that is all that a prophet has to say to me, he may as well say nothing. For what is the use of saying 'Arise and walk' to the man who has been lame

from his mother's womb? How can a foul body be washed clean by filthy hands? Ancient or modern preachers of a self-wrought-out morality exhort to impossibilities, and unless they follow their preaching of an unattainable ideal as Isaiah followed his, they are doomed to waste their words. He cried, 'Make you clean,' but he immediately went on to point to One who could make clean, could turn scarlet into snowy white, crimson into the lustrous purity of the unstained fleeces of sheep in green pastures. The assurance of God's forgiveness which deals with guilt, and of God's cleansing which deals with inclination and habit, must be the foundation of our cleansing ourselves from filthiness of flesh and spirit. The call to repentance needs the promise of pardon and divine help to purifying in order to become a gospel. And the call to 'repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,' is what we all, who are 'laden with iniquity,' and have forsaken the Lord, need, if ever we are to cease to do evil and learn to do well.

As with one thunder-clap the prophecy closes, pealing forth the eternal alternative set before every soul of man. Willing obedience to our Father God secures all good, the full satisfaction of our else hungry and ravenous desires. To refuse and rebel is to condemn ourselves to destruction. And no man can avert that consequence, or break the necessary connection between goodness and blessedness, 'for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it,' and what He speaks stands fast for ever and ever.

## THE STUPIDITY OF GODLESSNESS

‘The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib : but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider.’—ISAIAH i. 3.

THIS is primarily an indictment against Israel, but it touches us all. ‘Doth not know,’ *i.e.* has no familiar acquaintance with ; ‘doth not consider,’ *i.e.* frivolously ignores, never meditates on.

I. This is a common attitude of mind towards God.

Blank indifference towards Him is far more frequent than conscious hostility. Take a hundred men at random as they hurry through the streets, and how many of them would have to acknowledge that no thought of God had crossed their minds for days or months? So far as they are concerned, either in regard to their thoughts or actions, He *is* ‘a superfluous hypothesis.’ Most men are not conscious of rebellion against Him, and to charge them with it does not rouse conscience, but they cannot but plead guilty to this indictment, ‘God is not in all their thoughts.’

II. This attitude is strange and unnatural.

That a man should be able to forget God, and live as if there were no such Being, is strange. It is one instance of that awful power of ignoring the most important subjects, of which every life affords so many and tragic instances. It seems as if we had above us an opium sky which rains down soporifics, so that we are fast asleep to all that it most concerns us to wake to. But still stranger is it that, having that power of attending or not attending to subjects, we should so commonly exercise it on *this* subject. For, as the ox that knows the hand that feeds him,

and the ass that makes for his 'master's crib,' where he is sure of fodder and straw, might teach us, the stupidest brute has sense enough to recognise who is kind to him, or has authority over him, and where he can find what he needs. The godless man descends below the animals' level. And to ignore Him is intensely stupid. But it is worse than foolish, for

III. This attitude is voluntary and criminal.

Though there is not conscious hostility in it, the root of it is a sub-conscious sense of discordance with God, and of antagonism between His will and the man's. When we are quite sure that we love another, and that hearts beat in accord and wills go out towards the same things, we do not need to make efforts to think of that other, but our minds turn towards him or her as to a home, whenever released from the holding-back force of necessary occupations. If we love God, and have our will set to do His will, our thoughts will fly to Him, 'as doves to their windows.'

It is fed by preoccupation of thought with other things. We have but a certain limited amount of energy of thought or attention, and if we waste it, as much as most of us do, on 'things seen and temporal,' there is none left for the unseen realities and the God who is 'eternal, invisible.' It is often reinforced by theoretical uncertainty, sometimes real, often largely unreal. But after all, the true basis of it is, what Paul gives as its cause, 'they did not *like* to retain God in their knowledge.'

The criminality of this indifference! It is heartlessly ungrateful. Dogs lick the hand that feeds them; ox and ass in their dull way recognise something almost like obligation arising from benefits and care. No ingratitude is meaner and baser than that of which we

are guilty, if we do not requite Him 'in whose hands our breath is, and whose are all our ways,' by even one thankful heart-throb or one word shaped out of the breath that He gives.

IV. This attitude is fatal.

It separates us from God, and separation from Him is the very definition of Death. A God of whom we never think is all the same to us as a God who does not exist. Strike God out of a life, and you strike the sun out of the system, and wrap all in darkness and weltering chaos. 'This is life eternal, to know Thee'; but if 'Israel doth not know,' Israel has slain itself.

### WHAT SIN DOES TO MEN

'Ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water. 31. And the strong shall be as tow, and His work as a spark; and they shall both burn together, and none shall quench them.'—ISAIAH i. 30-31.

THE original reference of these words is to the threatened retribution for national idolatry, of which 'oaks' and 'gardens' were both seats. The nation was, as it were, dried up and made inflammable; the idol was as the 'spark' or the occasion for destruction. But a wider application, which comes home to us all, is to the fatal results of sin. These need to be very plainly stated, because of the deceitfulness of sin, which goes on slaying men by thousands in silence.

'That grim wolf with privy paw  
Daily devours apace.'

I. Sin withers.

We see the picture of a blasted tree in the woods, while all around are in full leaf, with tiny leaves half

developed and all brown at the edges. The prophet draws another picture, that of a garden not irrigated, and therefore, in the burning East, given over to barrenness.

Sin makes men fruitless and withered.

It involves separation from God, the source of all fruitfulness (Ps. i.).

Think of how many pure desires and innocent susceptibilities die out of a sinful soul. Think of how many capacities for good disappear. Think of how dry and seared the heart becomes. Think of how conscience is stifled.

All sin—any sin—does this.

Not only gross, open transgressions, but any piece of godless living will do it.

Whatever a man does against his conscience—neglect of duty, habitual untruthfulness, idleness—in a word, his besetting sin withers him up.

And all the while the evil thing that is drawing his life-blood is growing like a poisonous, blotched fungus in a wine-cask.

II. Sin makes men inflammable.

‘As tow’ or tinder.

A subsidiary reference may be intended to the sinful man as easily catching fire at temptation. But the main thought is that sin makes a man ready for destruction, ‘whose end is to be burned.’

The materials for retribution are laid up in a man’s nature by wrong-doing. The conspirators store the dynamite in a dark cellar. Conscience and memory are charged with explosives.

If tendencies, habits, and desires become tyrannous by long indulgence and cannot be indulged, what a fierce fire would rage then!

We have only to suppose a man made to know what is the real moral character of his actions, and to be unable to give them up, to have hell.

All this is confirmed by occasional glimpses which men get of themselves. Our own characters are the true Medusa-head which turns a man into stone when he sees it.

What, then, are we really doing by our sins? Piling together fuel for burning.

### III. Sin burns up.

‘Work as a spark.’ The evil deeds brought into contact with the doer work destruction. That is, if, in a future life or at any time, a man is brought face to face with his acts, then retribution begins. We shake off the burden of our actions by want of remembrance. But that power of ignoring the past may be broken down at any time. Suppose it happens that in another world it can no longer be exercised, what then?

Evil deeds are the occasion of the divine retribution. They are ‘a spark.’ It is they who light the pyre, not God. The prophet here protests in God’s name against the notion that He is to be blamed for punishing. Men are their own self-tormentors. The sinful man immolates himself. Like Isaac, he carries the wood and lays the pile for his own burning.

Christ severs the connection between us and our evil. He restores beauty and freshness to the blighted tree, planting it as ‘by the river of water,’ so that it ‘bringeth forth its fruit in its season,’ and its ‘leaf also doth not wither.’

## THE PERPETUAL PILLAR OF CLOUD AND FIRE

'And the Lord will create over the whole habitation of Mount Zion, and over her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night.'—ISAIAH iv. 5.

THE pillar of cloud and fire in the Exodus was one: there are to be as many pillars as there are 'assemblies' in the new era. Is it straining the language too much to find significance in that difference? Instead of the formal unity of the Old Covenant, there is a variety which yet is a more vital unity. Is there not a hint here of the same lesson that is taught by the change of the one golden lamp-stand into the seven, which are a better unity because Jesus Christ walks among them?

The heart of this promise, thus cast into the form of ancient experiences, but with significant variations, is that of true communion with God.

That communion makes those who have it glorious.

That communion supplies unflinching guidance.

A man in close fellowship with God will have wonderful flashes of sagacity, even about small practical matters. The gleam of the pillar will illumine conscience, and shine on many difficult, dark places. The 'simplicity' of a saintly soul will often see deeper into puzzling contingencies than the vulpine craftiness of the 'prudent.' The darker the night, the brighter the guidance.

That communion gives a defence.

The pillar came between Egypt and Israel, and kept the foe off the timid crowd of slaves. Whatever forms our enemies take, fellowship with God will invest us with a defence as protean as our perils. The same



cloud is represented in the context as being 'a pavilion for a shadow in the heat, and for a refuge and for a covert from storm and from rain.'

### A PROPHET'S WOES

'Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth! 9. In mine ears said the Lord of hosts, Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. 10. Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah. 11. Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them! 12. And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hands. 13. Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst. 14. Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. 15. And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: 16. But the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. 17. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat. 18. Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope: 19. That say, Let Him make speed, and hasten His work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it! 20. Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21. Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! 22. Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: 23. Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him! 24. Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. 25. Therefore is the anger of the Lord kindled against His people, and He hath stretched forth His hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still. 26. And He will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly: 27. None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken: 28. Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind: 29. Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions: yea, they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it. 30. And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.'—ISAIAH v. 8-30.

**DRUNKENNESS** is, in this text, one of a ring of plague-spots on the body politic of Judah. The prophet six times proclaims 'woe' as the inevitable end of these;

such 'sickness' is 'unto death,' unless repentance and another course of conduct bring healing. But drunkenness appears twice in this grim catalogue, and the longest paragraph of denunciation (vv. 11-17) is devoted to it. Its connection with the other vices attacked is loose, but it is worth noting that all these have an inner kinship, and tend to appear together. They are 'all in a string,' and where a community is cursed with one, the others will not be far away. They are a knot of serpents intertwined. We touch but slightly on the other vices denounced by the prophet's burning words, but we must premise the general observation that the same uncompromising plainness and boldness in speaking out as to social sins ought to characterise Christian teachers to-day. The prophet's office is not extinct in the church.

The first plague-spot is the accumulation of wealth in few hands, and the selfish withdrawal of its possessors from the life of the community. In an agricultural society like that of Judah, that clotting of wealth took the shape of 'land-grabbing,' and of evicting the small proprietors. We see it in more virulent forms in our great commercial centres, where the big men often become big by crushing out the little ones, and denude themselves of responsibility to the community in proportion as they clothe themselves with wealth. Wherever wealth is thus congested, and its obligations ignored by selfish indulgence, the seeds are sown which will spring up one day in 'anarchism.' A man need not be a prophet to have it whispered in his ear, as Isaiah had, that the end of selfish capitalism is a convulsion in which 'many houses shall be desolate,' and many fields barren. England needs the warning as much as Isaiah's Judah did.

Such selfish wealth leads, among other curses, to indolence and drunkenness, as the next woe shows. The people described make drinking the business of their lives, beginning early and sitting late. They have a varnish of art over their swinishness, and must have music as well as wine. So, in many a drink-shop in England, a piano or a band adds to the attractions, and gives a false air of æstheticism to pure animalism. Isaiah feels the incongruity that music should be so prostituted, and expresses it by adding to his list of musical instruments 'and wine,' as if he would underscore the degradation of the great art to be the cup-bearer of sots. Such revellers are blind to the manifest tokens of God's working, and the 'operation of His hands' excites only the tipsy gaze which sees nothing. That is one of the curses which dog the drunkard—that he takes no warning from the plain results of his vice as seen in others. He knows that it means shattered health, ruined prospects, broken hearts, but nothing rouses him from his fancy of impunity. High, serious thoughts of God and His government of the world and of each life are strange to him. His sin compels him to be godless, if he is not to go mad. But sometimes he wakes to a moment's sight of realities, and then he is miserable till his next bout buys fatal forgetfulness.

The prophet forces the end of a drunken nation on the unwilling attention of the roisterers, in verses 13-17, which throb with vehemence of warning and gloomy eloquence. What can such a people come to but destruction? Knowledge must languish, hunger and thirst must follow. Like some monster's gaping mouth, the pit yawns for them; and, drawn as by irresistible attraction, the pomp and the wicked, sense-

less jollity slide down into it. In the universal catastrophe, one thing alone stands upright, and is lifted higher, because all else has sunk so far,—the righteous judgment of the forgotten God. The grim picture is as true for individuals and their deaths as for a nation and its decay. And modern nations cannot afford to have this ulcer of drunkenness draining away their strength any more than Judah could. ‘By the soul only are the nations great and free,’ and a people can be neither where the drink fiend has his way.

Three woes follow which are closely connected. That pronounced on daring evil-doers, who not only let sin draw them to itself, but go more than halfway to meet it, needing no temptation, but drawing it to them eagerly, and scoffing at the merciful warnings of fatal consequences, comes first. Next is a woe on those who play fast and loose with plain morality, sophisticating conscience, and sapping the foundations of law. Such juggling follows sensual indulgence such as drunkenness, when it becomes habitual and audacious, as in the preceding woe. Loose or perverted codes of morality generally spring from bad living, seeking to shelter itself. Vicious principles are an afterthought to screen vicious practices. The last subject of the triple woes is self-conceit and pretence to superior illumination. Such very superior persons are emancipated from the rules which bind the common herd. They are so very clever that they have far outgrown the creeping moralities, which may do for old women and children. Do we not know the sort of people? Have we none of them surviving to-day?

Then Isaiah comes back to his theme of drunkenness, but in a new connection. It poisons the fountain of justice. There is a world of indignant contempt in

the prophet's scathing picture of those who are 'mighty' and 'men of strength,'—but how is their strength shown? They can stand any quantity of wine, and can 'mix their drinks,' and yet look sober! What a noble use to put a good constitution to! These valiant toppers are in authority as judges, and they sell their judgments to get money for their debauches. We do not see much of such scandals among us, but yet we *have* heard of leagues between liquor-sellers and municipal authorities, which certainly do *not* 'make for righteousness.' When shall we learn and practise the lesson that Isaiah was reading his countrymen,—that it is fatal to a nation when the private character of public men is regarded as of no account in political and civic life? The prophet had no doubt as to what must be the end of a state of things in which the very courts of law were honeycombed with corruption, and demoralised by the power of drink. His tremendous image of a fierce fire raging across a dry prairie, and burning the grass to its very roots, while the air is stifling with the thick 'dust' of the conflagration, proclaims the sure fate, sooner or later, of every community and individual that 'rejects the law of the Lord of Hosts, and despises the word of the Holy One of Israel.' Change the name, and the tale is told of us; for it is 'righteousness that exalteth a nation,' and no single vice drags after it more infallibly such a multitude of attendant demons as the vice of drunkenness, which is a crying sin of England to-day.

## VISION AND SERVICE

'In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. 2. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. 3. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory. 4. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. 5. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. 6. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: 7. And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. 8. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. 9. And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. 10. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. 11. Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate, 12. And the Lord have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land. 13. But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.'

—ISAIAH vi. 1-13.

WE may deal with this text as falling into three parts: the vision, its effect on the prophet, and his commission.

I. The Vision.—'In the year that King Uzziah died' is more than a date for chronological accuracy. It tells not only when, but why, the vision was given. The throne of David was empty.

God never empties places in our homes and hearts, or in the nation or the Church, without being ready to fill them. He sometimes empties them that He may fill them. Sorrow and loss are meant to prepare us for the vision of God, and their effect should be to purge the inward eye, that it may see Him. When the leaves drop from the forest trees we can see the blue sky which their dense abundance hid. Well for us if the passing of all that can pass drives us to Him who

cannot pass, if the unchanging God stands out more clear, more near, more dear, because of change.

As to the substance of this vision, we need not discuss whether, if we had been there, we should have seen anything. It was doubtless related to Isaiah's thoughts, for God does not send visions which have no point of contact in the recipient. However communicated, it was a divine communication, and a temporary unveiling of an eternal reality. The form was transient, but Isaiah then saw for a moment 'the things which are' and always are.

The essential point of the vision is the revelation of Jehovah as king of Judah. That relation guaranteed defence and demanded obedience. It was a sure basis of hope, but also a stringent motive to loyalty, and it had its side of terror as well as of joyfulness. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' The place of vision is the heavenly sanctuary of which the temple was a prophecy. Eminently significant and characteristic of the whole genius of the Old Testament is the absence of any description of the divine appearance. The prophet saw things 'which it is not lawful for a man to utter,' and his silence is not only reverent, but more eloquent than any attempt to put the Ineffable into words. Even in this act of manifestation God was veiled, and '*there* was the hiding of His power.' The train of His robe can be spoken of, but not the form which it concealed even in revealing it. Nature is the robe of God. It hides while it discloses, and discloses while it hides.

The hovering seraphim were in the attitude of service. They are probably represented as fiery forms, but are spoken of nowhere else in Scripture. The

significance of their attitude has been well given by Jewish commentators, who say, 'with two he covered his face that he might not see, and with two he covered his body that he might not be seen,' and we may add, 'with two he stood ready for service, by flight whithersoever the King would send.' Such awe-stricken reverence, such humble hiding of self, such alacrity for swift obedience, such flaming ardours of love and devotion, should be ours. Their song celebrated the holiness and the glory of Jehovah of hosts. We must ever remember that the root-meaning of 'holiness' is separation, and that the popular meaning of moral purity is secondary and derivative. What is rapturously sung in the threefold invocation of the seraphs is the infinite exaltation of Jehovah above all creatural conditions, limitations, and, we may add, conceptions. That separation, of course, includes purity, as may be seen from the immediate effect of the vision on the prophet, but the conception is much wider than that. Very beautifully does the second line of the song re-knit the connection between Jehovah and this world, so far beneath Him, which the burst of praise of His holiness seems to sever. The high heaven is a bending arch; its inaccessible heights ray down sunshine and drop down rain, and, as in the physical world, every plant grows by Heaven's gift, so in the world of humanity all wisdom, goodness, and joy are from the Father of lights. God's 'glory' is the flashing lustre of His manifested holiness, which fills the earth as the train of the robe filled the temple. The vibrations of that mighty hymn shook the 'foundations of the threshold' (Rev. Ver.) with its thunderous harmonies. 'The house was filled with smoke,' which, since it was an effect of the seraph's praise, is best explained



as referring to the fragrant smoke of incense which, as we know, symbolised 'the prayers of saints.'

II. The effect of the vision on the prophet.—The vision kindled as with a flash Isaiah's consciousness of sin. He expressed it in regard to his words rather than his works, partly because in one aspect speech is even more accurately than act a cast, as it were, of character, and partly because he could not but feel the difference between the mighty music that burst from these pure and burning lips and the words that flowed from and soiled his own. Not only the consciousness of sin, but the dread of personal evil consequences from the vision of the holy God, oppressed his heart. We see ourselves when we see God. Once flash on a heart the thought of God's holiness, and, like an electric search-light, it discloses flaws which pass unnoticed in dimmer light. The easy-going Christianity, which is the apology for religion with so many of us, has no deep sense of sin, because it has no clear vision of God. 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth Thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'

The next stage in Isaiah's experience is that sin recognised and confessed is burned away. Cleansing rather than forgiveness is here emphasised. The latter is, of course, included, but the main point is the removal of impurity. It is mediated by one of the seraphim, who is the messenger of God, which is just a symbolical way of saying that God makes penitents 'partakers of His holiness,' and that nothing less than a divine communication will make cleansing possible. It is effected by a live coal. Fire is purifying, and the New Testament has taught us that the true cleansing fire is that

of the Holy Spirit. But that live coal was taken from the altar. The atoning sacrifice has been offered there, and our cleansing depends on the efficacy of that sacrifice being applied to us.

The third stage in the prophet's experience is the readiness for service which springs up in his purged heart. God seeks for volunteers. There are no pressed men in His army. The previous experiences made Isaiah quick to hear God's call, and willing to respond to it by personal consecration. Take the motive-power of redemption from sin out of Christianity, and you break its mainspring, so that the clock will only tick when it is shaken. It is the Christ who died for our sins to whom men say, 'Command what Thou wilt, and I obey.'

III. The prophet's commission.—He was not sent on his work with any illusions as to its success, but, on the contrary, he had a clear premonition that its effect would be to deepen the spiritual deafness and blindness of the nation. We must remember that in Scripture the certain effect of divine acts is uniformly regarded as a divine design. Israel was so sunk in spiritual deadness that the issue of the prophet's work would only be to immerse the mass of 'this people' farther in it. To some more susceptible souls his message would be a true divine voice, rousing them like a trumpet, and that effect was what God desired; but to the greater number it would deepen their torpor and increase their condemnation. If men love darkness rather than light, the coming of the light works only judgment.

Isaiah recoils from the dreary prospect, and feels that this dreadful hardening cannot be God's ultimate purpose for the nation. So he humbly and wistfully

asks how long it is to last. The answer is twofold, heavy with a weight of apparently utter ruin in its first part, but disclosing a faint, far-off gleam of hope on its second. Complete destruction, and the casting of Israel out from the land, are to come. But as, though a goodly tree is felled, a stump remains which has vital force (or *substance*) in it, so, even in the utmost apparent desperateness of Israel's state, there will be in it 'the holy seed,' the 'remnant,' the true Israel, from which again the life shall spring, and stem and branches and waving foliage once more grow up.

## THE EMPTY THRONE FILLED

‘In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple.’—ISAIAH vi. 1.

UZZIAH had reigned for fifty-two years, during the greater part of which he and his people had been brilliantly prosperous. Victorious in war, he was also successful in the arts of peaceful industry. The later years of his life were clouded, but on the whole the reign had been a time of great well-being. His son and successor was a young man of five-and-twenty; and when he came to the throne ominous war-clouds were gathering in the North, and threatening to drift to Judah. No wonder that the prophet, like other thoughtful patriots, was asking himself what was to come in these anxious days, when the helm was in new hands, which, perhaps, were not strong enough to hold it. Like a wise man, he took his thoughts into the sanctuary; and there he understood. As he brooded, this great vision was disclosed to his inward eye. ‘In the year that King Uzziah died’ is a great deal more than a date for chronological purposes. It tells us not only the *when*, but the *why*, of the vision. The earthly king was laid in the grave; but the prophet saw that the true King of Israel was neither the dead Uzziah nor the young Jotham, but the Lord of hosts. And, seeing that, fears and forebodings and anxieties and the sense of loss, all vanished; and new strength came to Isaiah. He went into the temple laden with anxious thoughts; he came out of it with a springy step and a lightened heart, and the resolve ‘Here am I; send me.’ There are some lessons that seem to me of great importance for the conduct of our

daily life which may be gathered from this remarkable vision, with the remarkable note of time that is appended to it.

Now, before I pass on, let me remind you, in a word, of that apparently audacious commentary upon this great vision, which the Evangelist John gives us: 'These things said Esaias, when he had beheld *His* glory and spake of *Him*.' Then the Christ is the manifest Jehovah; is the King of Glory. Then the vision which was but a transitory revelation is the revelation of an eternal reality, and 'the vision splendid' does not 'fade but brightens, into the light of common day'; when instead of being flashed only on the inward eye of a prophet, it is made flesh and walks amongst us, and lives our life, and dies our death. Our eyes have seen the King in as true a reality, and in better fashion, than ever Isaiah did amid the sanctities of the Temple. And the eyes that have seen only the near foreground, the cultivated valleys, and the homes of men, are raised, and lo! the long line of glittering peaks, calm, silent, pure. Who will look at the valleys when the Himalayas stand out, and the veil is drawn aside?

I. Let me say a word or two about the ministration of loss and sorrow in preparing for the vision.

It was when 'King Uzziah died' that the prophet 'saw the Lord sitting upon the throne.' If the Throne of Israel had not been empty, he would not have seen the throned God in the heavens. And so it is with all our losses, with all our sorrows, with all our disappointments, with all our pains; they have a mission to reveal to us the throned God. The possession of the things that are taken away from us, the joys which our sorrows smite into dust, have the same mission,

and the highest purpose of every good, of every blessing, of every possession, of every gladness, of all love—the highest mission is to lead us to Him. But, just as men will frost a window, so that the light may come in but the sight cannot go out, so by our own fault and misuse of the good things which are meant to lead us up to, and to show us, God, we frost and darken the window so that we cannot see what it is meant to show us. And then a mighty and merciful hand shivers the painted glass into fragments, because it has been dimming ‘the white radiance of Eternity.’ And though the casement may look gaunt, and the edges of the broken glass may cut and wound, yet the view is unimpeded. When the gifts that we have misused are withdrawn, we can see the heaven that they too often hide from us. When the leaves drop there is a wider prospect. When the great tree is fallen there is opened a view of the blue above. When the night falls the stars sparkle. When other props are struck away we can lean our whole weight upon God. When Uzziah dies the King becomes visible.

Is that what our sorrows, our pains, losses, disappointments do for us? Well for those to whom loss is gain, because it puts them in possession of the enduring riches! Well for those to whom the passing of all that can pass is a means of revealing Him who ‘is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever’! The message to us of all these our pains and griefs is ‘Come up hither.’ In them all our Father is saying to us, ‘Seek ye My face.’ Well for those who answer, ‘Thy face, Lord, will I seek. Hide not Thy face far from me.’

Let us take care that we do not waste our griefs and sorrows. They absorb us sometimes with vain regrets. They jaundice and embitter us sometimes with re-

bellious thoughts. They often break the springs of activity and of interest in others, and of sympathy with others. But their true intention is to draw back the thin curtain, and to show us 'the things that are,' the realities of the throned God, the skirts that fill the Temple, the hovering seraphim, and the coal from the altar that purges.

II. Let me suggest how our text shows us the compensation that is given for all losses.

As I have pointed out already, the thought conveyed to the prophet by this vision was not only the general one, of God's sovereign rule, but the special one of His rule over and for, and His protection of, the orphan kingdom which had lost its king. The vision took the special shape that the moment required. It was because the earthly king was dead that the living, heavenly King was revealed.

So there is just suggested by it this general thought, that the consciousness of God's presence and work for us takes in each heart the precise shape that its momentary necessities and circumstances require. That infinite fulness is of such a nature as that it will assume any form for which the weakness and the need of the dependent creature call. Like the one force which scientists now are beginning to think underlies all the various manifestations of energy in nature, whether they be named light, heat, motion, electricity, chemical action, or gravitation, the one same vision of the throned God, manifest in Jesus Christ, is protean. Here it flames as light, there burns as heat, there flashes as electricity; here as gravitation holds the atoms together, there as chemical energy separates and decomposes them; here results in motion, there in rest; but is the one force. And so the one God will

become everything and anything that every man, and each man, requires. He shapes himself according to our need. The water of life does not disdain to take the form imposed upon it by the vessel into which it is poured. The Jews used to say that the manna in the wilderness tasted to each man as each man desired. And the God, who comes to us all, comes to us each in the shape that we need; just as He came to Isaiah in the manifestation of His *kingly* power, because the throne of Judah was vacated.

So when our hearts are sore with loss, the New Testament Manifestation of the King, even Jesus Christ, comes to us and says, 'The same is my mother and sister and brother,' and His sweet love compensates for the love that can die, and that has died. When losses come to us He draws near, as durable riches and righteousness. In all our pains He is our anodyne, and in all our griefs He brings the comfort; He is all in all, and each withdrawn gift is compensated, or will be compensated, to each in Him.

So, dear friends, let us learn God's purpose in emptying hearts and chairs and homes. He empties them that He may fill them with Himself. He takes us, if I might so say, into the darkness, as travellers to the south are to-day passing through Alpine tunnels, in order that He may bring us out into the land where 'God Himself is sun and moon,' and where there are ampler ether and brighter constellations than in these lands where we dwell. He means that, when Uzziah dies, our hearts shall see the King. And for all mourners, for all tortured hearts, for all from whom stays have been stricken and resources withdrawn, the old word is true: 'Lord shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.'



Let me recall to you what I have already insisted on more than once, that the perfecting of this vision is in the historical fact of the Incarnate Son. Jesus Christ shows us God. Jesus Christ is the King of Glory. If we will go to Him, and fix our eyes and hearts on Him, then losses may come, and we shall be none the poorer; death may unclasp our hands from dear hands, but He will close a dearer one round the hand that is groping for a stay; and nothing can be taken away but He will more than fill the gap it leaves by His own sweet presence. If our eyes behold the King, if we are like John the Seer in his rocky Patmos, and see the Christ in His glory and royalty, then He will lay His hands on us and say, 'Fear not! Weep not; I am the First and the Last,' and forebodings, and fears, and sense of loss will all be changed into trustfulness and patient submission. 'Seeing Him, who is invisible,' we shall be able to endure and to toil, until the time when the vision of earth is perfected by the beholding of heaven. Blessed are they who with purged eyes see, and with yielding hearts obey, the heavenly vision, and turn to the King and offer themselves for any service He may require, saying, 'Here am I; send me.'

### A SERAPH'S WINGS

'With twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.'—ISAIAH vi. 2.

THIS is the only mention in Scripture of the seraphim. I do not need to enter upon the much-debated, and in some respects interesting, question as to whether these are to be taken as identical with the cherubim, or as to whether they are altogether imaginary and symbolical

beings, nor as to whether they are identical with the angels, or part of their hierarchy. All that may be left on one side. I would only notice, before I deal with the specific words of my text, the significance of the name. It means 'the flaming' or 'burning ones,' and so the attendants of the divine glory in the heavens, whether they be real or imaginary beings, are represented as flashing with splendour, as full of swift energy, like a flame of fire, as glowing with fervid love, as blazing with enthusiasm. That is the type of the highest creatural being, which stands closest to God. There is no ice in His presence, and the nearer we get to Him in truth, the more we shall glow and burn. Cold religion is a contradiction in terms, though, alas, it is a reality in professors.

And so with that explanation, and putting aside all these other questions, let us gather up some, at least, of the lessons as to the essentials of worship, and try to grasp the prophecy of the heavenly state, given us in these words.

### I. The Wings of Reverence.

He covered his face, or *they* covered *their* faces, lest they should see. As a man brought suddenly into the sunlight, especially if out of a darkened chamber, by an instinctive action shades his eyes with his hand, so these burning creatures, confronted with the still more fervid and fiery light of the divine nature, fold one pair of their great white pinions over their shining faces, even whilst they cry 'Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord God Almighty!'

And does not that teach us the incapacity of the highest creature, with the purest vision, to gaze undazzled into the shining light of God? I, for my

part, do not believe that any conceivable extension of creatural faculties, or any conceivable hallowing of creatural natures, can make the creature able to gaze upon God. I know that it is often said that the joy of the future life for men is what the theologians call 'the beatific vision,' in which there shall be direct sight of God, using that word in its highest sense, as applied to the perceptions of the spirit, and not of the sense. But I do not think the Bible teaches us that. It does teach us 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' But who is the 'Him'? Jesus Christ. And, in my belief, Jesus Christ will, to all eternity, be the medium of manifesting God, and there will remain, to all eternity, the incapacity which clogs creatures in time—'No man hath seen God at any time, nor *can* see Him.'

But my text, whilst it thus suggests solemn thoughts of a Light that cannot be looked at with undazzled eyes, does also suggest to us by contrast the possibility of far feebler-sighted and more sinful creatures than these symbolical seraphs coming into a Presence in which God shall be manifest to them; and they will need no veil drawn by themselves across their eyes. God has veiled Himself, that 'we, with unveiled faces, beholding His glory, may be changed into the same image.' So the seraph, with his white wings folded before his eyes, may at once stand to us as a parallel and a contrast to what the Christian may expect. We, *we* can see Jesus, with no incapacity except such as may be swept away by His grace and our will. And direct vision of the whole Christ is the heaven of heaven, even as the partial vision of the partially perceived Christ is the sweetest sweetness of a life on earth.

There is no need for us to draw any screen between our happy eyes and the Face in which we 'behold the glory as of the only Begotten of the Father.' All the tempering that the divine lustre needed has been done by Him who veils His glory with the veil of Christ's flesh, and therein does away the need for any veil that we can draw.

But, beyond that, there is another consideration that I should like to suggest, as taught us by the use of this first pair of the six wings, and that is the absolute need for the lowliest reverence in our worship of God. It is strange, but true, I am afraid, that the Christian danger is to weaken the sense of the majesty and splendour and separation of God from His creatures. And all that is good in the Christian revelation may be so abused as that there shall come, what I am sure does in effect sometimes come, a terrible lack of due reverence in our so-called worship. What does that lofty chorus of 'Holy! Holy! Holy!' that burst from those immortal lips mean but the declaration that God is high above, and separate from, all limitations and imperfections of creatures? And we Christians, who hear it re-echoed in the very last Book of Scripture by the four-and-twenty elders who represent redeemed humanity, have need to take heed that we do not lose our reverence in our confidence, and that we do not part with godly fear in our filial love. If one looks at a congregation of professing Christians engaged in their worship, does not one feel and see that there is often a carelessness and shallowness, a want of realisation of the majesty and sanctity and tremendousness of that Father to whom we draw near? Brethren, if a seraph hides his face, surely it becomes us to see to it that, since we worship a God who 'is

a consuming fire,' we serve Him with far deeper 'reverence and godly fear' than ordinarily mark our devotions.

## II. The Wings of Humility.

'With twain he covered his feet.' The less comely and inferior parts of that fiery corporeity were veiled lest they should be seen by the Eyes that see all things. The wings made no screen that hid the seraph's feet from the eye of God, but it was the instinctive lowly sense of unworthiness that folded them across the feet, even though they, too, burned as a furnace. The nearer we get to God, the more we shall be aware of our limitations and unworthiness, and it is because that vision of the Lord sitting on 'His throne, high and lifted up,' with the thrilling sense of His glory filling the holy temple of the universe, does not burn before us that we can conceit ourselves to have anything worth pluming ourselves upon. Once lift the curtain, once let my eye be flooded with the sight of God, and away goes all my self-conceit, and all my fancied superiority above others. One little molehill is pretty nearly the same height as another, if you measure them both against the top of the Himalayas, that lie in the background, with their glittering peaks of snow. 'Star differeth from star in glory' in a winter's night, but when the great sun swims into the sky, they all vanish together. If you and I saw God burning before us, as Isaiah saw Him, we should veil ourselves, and lose all that which so often veils Him from us—the fancy that we are anything when we are nothing. And the nearer we get to God, and the purer we are, the more shall we be keenly conscious of our imperfections and our sins. 'If I say I am perfect,' said Job in

his wise way, 'this also should prove me perverse.' Consciousness of sin is the continual accompaniment of growth in holiness. 'The heavens are not pure in His sight, and He chargeth His angels with folly.' Everything looks black beside that sovereign whiteness. Get God into your lives, and you will see that the feet need to be washed, and you will cry, 'Lord! not my feet only, but my hands and my head!'

### III. Lastly—The Wings for Service.

'With twain he did fly.' That is the emblem of joyous, buoyant, unhindered motion. It is strongly, sadly contrary to the toilsome limitations of us heavy creatures who have no wings, but can at best run on His service, and often find it hard to 'walk with patience in the way that is set before us.' But—service with wings, or service with lame feet, it matters not. Whosoever, beholding God, has found need to hide his face from that Light even whilst he comes into the Light, and to veil his feet from the all-seeing Eye, will also feel impulses to go forth in His service. For the perfection of worship is neither the consciousness of my own insufficiency, nor the humble recognition of His glory, nor the great voice of praise that thrilled from those immortal lips, but it is the doing of His will in daily life. Some people say the service of man is the service of God. Yes, when it is service of man, done for God's sake, it is so, and only then. The old motto, 'Work is worship,' may preach a great truth or a most dangerous error. But there is no possibility of error or danger in maintaining this: that the climax and crown of all worship, whether for us footsore servants upon earth, or for these winged attendants on the throne of the

King in the heavens, is activity in obedience. And that is what is set before us here.

Now, dear brethren, we, as Christians, have a far higher motive for service than the seraphs had. We have been redeemed, and the spirit of the old Psalm should animate all our obedience: 'O Lord, truly I am Thy servant.' Why? The next clause tells us: 'Thou hast loosed my bonds.' The seraphs could not say that, and therefore our obedience, our activity in doing the will of the Father in heaven, should be more buoyant, more joyful, more swift, more unrestricted than even theirs.

The seraphim were winged for service even while they stood above the throne and pealed forth their thunderous praise which shook the Temple. May we not discern in that a hint of the blessed blending of two modes of worship which will be perfectly united in heaven, and which we should aim at harmonising even on earth? 'His servants serve Him and see His face.' There is possible, even on earth, some foretaste of the perfection of that heavenly state in which no worship in service shall interfere with the worship in contemplation. Mary, sitting at Christ's feet, and Martha, busy in providing for His comfort, may be, to a large extent, united in us even here, and will be perfectly so hereafter, when the practical and the contemplative, the worship of noble aspiration, of heart-filling gazing, and that of active service shall be indissolubly blended.

The seraphs sang 'Holy! Holy! Holy!' but they, and all the hosts of heaven, learn a new song from the experience of earth, and redeemed men are the chorus-leaders of the perfected and eternal worship of the heavens. For we read that it is the four-and-twenty

elders who begin the song and sing to the Lamb that redeemed them by His blood, and that the living creatures and all the hosts of the angels to that song can but say 'Amen!'

### THE MAKING OF A PROPHET

'Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.'—ISAIAH vi. 5.

IN previous pages we have seen how Isaiah's vision of Jehovah throned in the Temple, 'high and lifted up,' derived significance from the time of its occurrence. It was 'in the year that' the earthly King 'died' that the heavenly King was revealed. The passing of the transient prepared the way for the revelation of the Eternal, and the revelation of the Eternal more than compensated for the passing of the transient. But strengthening and calming as these thoughts are, they by no means exhaust the purpose of the vision, nor do they describe all its effects on the recipient. These were, first and immediately, the consciousness of unworthiness and sin, expressed in the words that I have taken for my text. Then came the touch of the 'live coal from the altar,' laid on the unclean lips by the seraph; and on that followed willing surrender for a perilous service.

These three stages flowing from the vision of God, recognition of sin, experience of purging, abandonment to obedience and service, must be repeated in us all, if we are to live worthy lives. There may be much that is beautiful and elevating and noble without these, but unless in some measure we pass through



the prophet's experience, we shall fail to reach the highest possibilities of beauty and of service that open before us. So I wish to consider, very simply, these three stages in my remarks now.

I. If we see *God* we shall see our *sin*.

There came on the prophet, as in a flash, the two convictions, one which he learned from the song of the seraphs, ringing in music through the Temple, and one which rose up, like an answering note from the voice of conscience within. They sang 'Holy! holy! holy! Lord God Almighty.' And what was the response to that, in the prophet's heart?—'I am unclean.' Each major note has a corresponding minor, and the triumphant doxology of the seraph wakes in the hearer's conscience the lowly confession of personal unlikeness to the holiness of God. It was not joy that sprang in Isaiah's heart when he saw the throned King, and heard the proclamation of His name. It was not reverence merely that bowed his head in the dust, but it was the awakened consciousness, 'Thou art holy; and now that I understand, in some measure, what Thy holiness means, I look on myself and I say, "unclean! unclean!"'

The prophet's confession assumes a form which may strike us as somewhat singular. Why is it that he speaks of 'unclean lips,' rather than of an unclean heart? I suppose partly because, in a very deep sense, a man's words are more accurately a cast, as it were, from a man's character than even his actions, and partly because the immediate occasion of his confession was the words of the seraphim, and he could not but contrast what came burning from their pure lips with what had trickled from, and soiled, his own.

But, however expressed, the consciousness of personal

unlikeness to the holiness of God is the first result, and the instantaneous result, of any real apprehension of that holiness, and of any true vision of Him. Like some search-light flung from a ship over the darkling waters, revealing the dark doings of the enemy away out yonder in the night, the thought of God and His holiness streaming in upon a man's soul, if it does so in any adequate measure, is sure to disclose the heaving waters and the skulking foes that are busy in the dark.

But it was not only the consciousness of sinfulness and antagonism that woke up instantaneously in response to that vision of the holy God. It was likewise a shrinking apprehension of personal evil from contact of God's light with Isaiah's darkness. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.' What is to become, then, of the man that has neither the one nor the other? The experience of all the world witnesses that whenever there comes, in reality, or in a man's conceptions or fancy, the contact of the supernatural, as it is called, with the natural, there is a shrinking, a sense of eeriness, an apprehension of vague possibilities of evil. The sleeping snake that is coiled in every soul stirs and begins to heave in its bulk, and wake, when the thought of a holy God comes into the heart. Now, I do not suppose that consciousness of sin is the whole explanation of that universal human feeling, but I am very sure it is an element in it, and I suspect that if there were no sin, there would be no shrinking.

At all events, be that as it may, these are the two thoughts that, involuntarily and spontaneously and immediately, sprang in this man's heart when his

purged eyes saw the King on His throne. He did not leap up with gladness at the vision. Its consolatory and its strengthening aspects were not the first that impinged upon his eye, or upon his consciousness, but the first thing was an instinctive recoil, 'Woe is me ; I am undone.' Now, brethren, I venture to think that one main difference between shallow religion and real is to be found here, that the dim, far-off vision, if we may venture to call it so, which serves the most of us for a sight of God, leaves us quite complacent, and with very slight and superficial conceptions of our own evil, and that if once we saw, in so far as it is possible for humanity to-day to see, God as He is, and heard in the depths of our hearts that 'Holy! holy! holy!' from the burning seraphim, the easy-going, self-satisfied judgment of ourselves which too many of us cherish would be utterly impossible; and would disappear, shrivelled up utterly in the light of God. 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear,' said Job, 'but now mine eye seeth Thee; therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' A hearsay God and a self-complacent beholder—a God really seen, and a man down in the dust before Him! Has that vision ever blazed in on you? And if it has, has not the light shown you the seaminess of much in which a dimmer light detects no flaws or stains? Thank God if, having seen Him, you see yourselves. If you have not felt, 'I am unclean and undone,' depend upon it, your knowledge of God is faint and dim, and He is rather One heard of from the lips of others than realised in your own experience.

II. Again, note the second stage here, in the education of a soul for service—the sin, recognised and repented, is burned away.

‘Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo! this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.’

Now, I would notice as to this stage of the process, first, that Isaiah singularly passes beyond all the old ritual in which he had been brought up, and recognises another kind of cleansing than that which it embodied. He had got beyond the ritual to what the ritual meant. We have passed beyond the ritual, too, by another process; and, though I would by no means read full, plain, articulate Christian thought into the vision of Isaiah—which would be an anachronism, and unfaithful to the gradual historical development of the idea and means of redemption—yet I cannot help pointing to the fact that, even although this vision is located as seen in the Temple, there is not a single reference (except that passing allusion to the altar) to the ritual of the Temple, but the cleansing comes in another fashion altogether.

But far more important than that thought is the human condition that is required ere this cleansing can be realised. ‘I am a man of unclean lips.’ ‘I am undone!’ It was because that conviction and confession sprang in the prophet’s consciousness that the seraph winged his way with the purifying fire in his hands. Which being translated is just this: faith alone will not bring cleansing. There must go with it what we call, in our Christian phraseology, repentance, which is but the recognition of my own antagonism to the holiness of God, and the resolve to turn my back on my own past self. Now, it seems to me that a great deal of what is called, and in a sense is, Evangelical

teaching, fails to represent the full counsel of God, in the matter of man's redemption, because it puts a one-sided emphasis on faith, and slurs over the accompanying idea of repentance. And I am here to say that a trust in Jesus Christ, which is unaccompanied by a profound penitent consciousness and abhorrence of one's own sins, and a resolve to turn away from them for the time to come, is not a faith which will bring either pardon or cleansing. We do not need to have less said about trust; we need to have a great deal more said about repentance. You have to learn what it is to say, 'I abhor myself'; you have to learn what it is to say, 'I will turn right round, and leave all that past behind me; and go in the opposite direction'; or the faith which you say you are exercising will neither save nor cleanse your souls nor your lives.

Again, note that we have here set forth most strikingly the other great truth that, side by side, and as closely synchronous as the flash and the peal, as soon as the consciousness of sin and the aversion from it spring in a man's heart, the seraph's wings are set in motion. Remember that beautiful old story in the historical books, of how the erring king, brought to sanity and repentance by Nathan's apologue, put all his acknowledgments in these words, 'I have sinned against the Lord'; and how the confession was not out of his lips, nor had died in its vibration in the atmosphere, before the prophet, with divine authority, replied with equal brevity and completeness, and as if the two sayings were parts of one sentence, '*And* the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.' That is all. Simultaneous are the two things. To confess is to be forgiven, and the

moment that the consciousness of sin rises in the heart, that moment does the heavenly messenger come to still and soothe.

Still further, notice how the cleansing comes as a divine gift. It is purifying, much more than pardon, that is set forth in the symbolical incident before us. The seraph is the divine messenger, and he brings a coal from the altar, and lays that upon the prophet's lips, which is but the symbolical way of saying that the man who is conscious of his own evil will find in himself a blessed despair of being his own healer, and that he has to turn to the divine source, the vision of which has kindled the consciousness, to find there that which will take away the evil. The Lord is 'He that healeth us.'

But, further, the cleansing is by fire. By which, as I suppose, in the present context, and at Isaiah's stage of religious knowledge and experience, we are to understand that great thought that God burns away our sins, as you put a piece of foul clay into the fire, and the stain melts from the surface like a dissipating cloud as the heat finds its way into the substance. 'He will baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire'—a fire that quickens. A new impulse will be granted, which will become the life of the sinful man's life, and will emancipate him from the power of his own darkness and evil.

Now, let us remember that *we* have the fulness of all that was shadowed to the prophet in this vision, and that the reality of every one of these emblems is gathered together—if I may so say—not with confusion, but with abundance and opulence in Jesus Christ Himself. Is He not the seraph? Is He not Himself the burning coal? Is He not the altar from which it is

taken? All that is needed to make the foulest clean is given in Christ's great work. Brethren, we shall never understand the deepest secret of Christ and of Christianity until we learn and hold fast by the conviction that the central work of Jesus is to deal with man's sin; and that whatever else Christianity is, it is first and foremost God's way of redeeming the world, and making it possible for the unholy to dwell with His holy self.

III. Lastly, and only a word, the third stage here is—the purged spirit is ready for service.

God did not bid the prophet go on His mission till the prophet had voluntarily accepted the mission. He said, 'Who will go for us?' He wants no pressed men in His army. He does not work with reluctant servants. There is, first, the yielding of the will, and then there is the enduement with the privilege of service. The prophet, having passed through the preceding experiences, had thereby received a quick ear to hear God's calling for volunteers. And we shall not hear Him asking 'Who will go?' unless we have, in our measure, passed through similar experiences. It will be a test of having done so, of our having been purged from our evil, if, when other people think that it is only Eli speaking, we know that it is the Lord that has called us, and say, 'Here am I.'

For such experiences as I have been describing do influence the will, and mould the heart, and make it a delight to do God's commandments, and to execute His purpose, and to be the ministers of His great Word. Some of us are willing to say that we have learned God's holiness; that we have seen and confessed our sins; that we have received pardon and cleansing. Have these experiences made you ready for any

service? Have they made your will flexible—made you dethrone yourself, and enthrone the King whom the prophet saw? If they have, they are genuine; if they have not, they are not. Submission of will; glorying in being the instrument of the divine purpose; ears sharpened to catch His lowest whisper; eyes that, like those of a dog fixed on his master, watch for the faintest indication from his guiding eye—these are the infallible tests and signs of having had lips and heart touched with the live coal that burns away our uncleanness.

So, friends, would that I could flash upon every conscience that vision! But you can do so for yourselves. Let me beseech you to bring yourselves honestly into that solemn light of the character of God, and to ask yourselves, ‘How can two walk together except they be agreed?’ Do not put away such thoughts with any shallow, easy-going talk about how God is good and will not be hard upon a poor fellow that has tried to do his best. God *is* good; God is love. But divine goodness and love cannot find a way by which the unclean shall dwell with the clean. What then? This then—Jesus Christ has come. We may be made clean if we trust in Him, and forsake our sins. He will touch the heart and lips with the fire of His own Spirit, and then it will be possible to dwell with the everlasting burnings of that flaming fire which is a holy God. Blessed are they that have seen the vision; blessed they that have felt it disclosing their own sins; blessed they whose hearts have been purged. Blessed most of all they who, educated and trained through these experiences, have taken this as the motto of their lives, ‘Here am I; send me.’



## SHILOAH AND EUPHRATES

Forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly . . . the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many.'

ISAIAH viii. 6, 7.

THE kingdom of Judah was threatened with a great danger in an alliance between Israel and Damascus. The cowardly King Ahaz, instead of listening to Isaiah's strong assurances and relying on the help of God, made what he thought a master-stroke of policy in invoking the help of the formidable Assyrian power. That ambitious military monarchy was eager to find an excuse for meddling in the politics of Syria, and nothing loath, marched an army down on the backs of the invaders, which very soon compelled them to hasten to Judah in order to defend their own land. But, as is always the case, the help invoked was his ruin. Like all conquering powers, once having got its foot inside the door, Assyria soon followed bodily. First Damascus and Israel were ravaged and subdued, and then Judah. That kingdom only purchased the privilege of being devoured last. Like the Spaniards in Mexico, the Saxons in England, the English in a hundred Indian territories, the allies that came to help remained to conquer, and Judah fell, as we all know.

This is the simple original application of these words. They are a declaration that in seeking for help from others Judah was forsaking God, and that the helper would become ruler, and the ruler an oppressive tyrant.

The waters of Shiloah that go softly stand as an emblem of the Davidic monarchy as God meant it

to be, and, since that monarchy was itself a prophecy, they therefore represent the kingdom of God or the Messianic King. The 'waters strong and many' are those of the Euphrates, which swells and overflows and carries havoc, and are taken as the emblem of the wasting sweep of the Assyrian king, whose capital stood on its banks.

But while thus there is a plain piece of political history in the words, they are also the statement of general principles which apply to every individual soul and its relations to the kingdom, the gentle kingdom, of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

#### I. The Gentle Kingdom.

That little brooklet slipping quietly along; what a striking image of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ!

It suggests the character of the King, the 'meek and lowly in heart.' It suggests the manner of His rule as wielded in gentleness and exercising no compulsion but that of love. It suggests the blessed results of His reign under the image of the fertility, freshness, and beauty which spring up wherever 'the river cometh.' That kingdom we are all summoned to enter.

#### II. The Rejection of the Kingdom.

Strange and awful fact that men do turn away from it and Him.

In what does rejection consist?

In not trusting in His power to help and deliver.

In seeking help from other sources. This rejection is often unconscious on the part of men who are guilty of it.

#### III. The Allies who are preferred to the gentle King.

The crowd of worldly things.

What is to be noticed is that at first the preference seems to answer and be all right.

## IV. The Allies becoming Tyrants.

The swift Euphrates in spate. That is what the rejecters have chosen for themselves. Better to have lived by Shiloah than to have built their houses by the side of such a raging stream. Mark how this is a divine retribution indeed, but a natural process too.

(a) If Christ does not rule us, a mob of tyrants will.

Our own passions.

Our own evil habits.

The fascinating sins around us.

(b) They soon cease to seem helpers, and become tyrants.

How quickly the pleasure of sin disappears—like some bird that loses its gay plumage as it grows old.

How stern becomes the necessity to obey; how great the difficulty of breaking off evil habits! So a man becomes the slave of his own lusts, of his indulged tastes, which rise above all restraints and carry away all before them, like the Euphrates in flood. Fertility is turned to barrenness; a foul deposit of mud overlays the soil; houses on the sand are washed away; corpses float on the tawny wave. The soul that rejects Christ's gentle sway is harried and laid waste by a mob of base-born tyrants. We have to make our choice—either Christ or these; either a service which is freedom, or an apparent freedom which is slavery; either a worship which exalts, or a worship which embrutes. 'If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.'

'There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God.' It is peaceful to pitch our tents beside its calm flow, whereon shall go no hostile fleets, and whence we shall but pass to the city above, in the

midst of the street whereof the 'river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeds out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.'

### THE KINGDOM AND THE KING

'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. 3. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before Thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. 4. For Thou hast broken the yoke of His burden, and the staff of His shoulder, the rod of His oppressor, as in the day of Midian. 5. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood: but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. 6. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. 7. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.'—ISAIAH ix. 2-7.

THE darker the cloud, the brighter is the rainbow. This prophecy has for its historical background the calamitous reign of the weak and wicked Ahaz, during which the heart of the nation was bowed, like a forest before the blast, by the dread of foreign invasion and conquest. The prophet predicts a day of gloom and anguish, and then, out of the midst of his threatenings, bursts this glorious vision, sudden as sunrise. With consummate poetic art, the consequences of Messiah's rule are set forth before He Himself is brought into view.

I. Image is heaped on image to tell the blessedness of that reign (vs. 2-5). Each trait of the glowing description is appropriate to the condition of Israel under Ahaz; but each has a meaning far beyond that limited application. Isaiah may, or may not, have been aware of 'what' or 'what time' his words portrayed in their deepest, that is, their true meaning, but if we believe in supernatural prediction which, though it may have found its point of attachment in the

circumstances of the present, was none the less the voice of the Spirit of God, we shall not make, as is often done now, the prophet's construction of his words the rule for their interpretation. What the prophecy was discerned to point to by its utterer or his contemporaries, is one thing; quite another is what God meant by it.

First we have the picture of the nation groping in a darkness that might be felt, the emblem of ignorance, sin, and sorrow, and inhabiting a land over which, like a pall, death cast its shadow. On that dismal gloom shines all at once a 'great light,' the emblem of knowledge, purity, and joy. The daily mercy of the dawn has a gospel in it to a heart that believes in God; for it proclaims the divine will that all who sit in darkness shall be enlightened, and that every night but prepares the way for the freshness and stir of a new morning. The great prophecy of these verses in its indefiniteness goes far beyond its immediate occasion in the state of Judah under Ahaz. As surely as the dawn floods all lands, so surely shall all who walk in darkness see the great light; and wherever is a 'land of the shadow of death,' there shall the light shine. It is 'the light of the world.'

Verse 3 gives another phase of blessing. Israel is conceived of as dwindled in number by deportation and war. But the process of depopulation is arrested and reversed, and numerical increase, which is always a prominent feature in Messianic predictions, is predicted. That increase follows the dawning of the light, for men will flock to the 'brightness of its rising.' We know that the increase comes from the attractive power of the Cross, drawing men of many tongues to it; and we have a right to bring the inter-

pretation, which the world's history gives, into our understanding of the prophecy. That enlarged nation is to have abounding joy.

Undoubtedly, the rendering 'To it thou hast increased the joy' is correct, as that of the Authorized Version (based upon the Hebrew text) is clearly one of several cases in which the partial similarity in spelling and identity in sound of the Hebrew words for 'not' and 'to it,' have led to a mistaken reading. The joy is described in words which dance and sing, like the gladness of which they tell. The mirth of the harvest-field, when labour is crowned with success, and the sterner joy of the victors as they part the booty, with which mingles the consciousness of foes overcome and dangers averted, are blended in this gladness. We have the joy of reaping a harvest of which we have not sowed the seed. Christ has done that; we have but to enjoy the results of His toil. We have to divide the spoil of a victory which we have not won. He has bound the strong man, and we share the benefits of His overcoming the world.

That last image of conquerors dividing the spoil leads naturally to the picture in verse 4 of emancipation from bondage, as the result of a victory like Gideon's with his handful. Who the Gideon of this new triumph is, the prophet will not yet say. The 'yoke of his burden' and 'the rod of his oppressor' recall Egypt and the taskmasters.

Verse 5 gives the reason for the deliverance of the slaves; namely, the utter destruction of the armour and weapons of their enemy. The Revised Version is right in its rendering, though it may be doubtful whether its margin is not better than its text, since

not only are 'boot' and 'booted' as probable renderings of the doubtful words as 'armour' and 'armed man,' but the picture of the warrior striding into battle with his heavy boots is more graphic than the more generalised description in the Revised Version's text. In any case, the whole accoutrements of the oppressor are heaped into a pile and set on fire; and, as they blaze up, the freed slaves exult in their liberty. The blood-drenched cloaks have been stripped from the corpses and tossed on the heap, and, saturated as they are, they burn. So complete is the victory that even the weapons of the conquered are destroyed. Our conquering King has been manifested, that He might annihilate the powers by which evil holds us bound. His victory is not by halves. 'He taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted.'

II. Now we are ready to ask, And who is to do all this? The guarantee for its accomplishment is the person of the conquering Messiah. The hopes of Israel did not, and those of the world do not, rest on tendencies, principles, laws of progress, advance of civilisation, or the like abstractions or impersonalities, but on a living Person, in whom all principles which make for righteousness and blessedness for individuals and communities are incarnated, and whose vital action works perpetually in mankind.

In this prophecy the prophet is plainly speaking greater things than he knew. We do not get to the meaning if we only ask ourselves what did he understand by his words, or what did his hearers gather from them? They and he would gather the certainty of the coming of Messiah with wondrous attributes of power and divine gifts, by whose reign light, gladness, liberty would belong to the oppressed

nation. But the depth of the prophecy needed the history of the Incarnation for its disclosure. If this is not a God-given prediction of the entrance into human form of the divine, it is something very like miraculous that, somehow or other, words should have been spoken, without any such reference, which fit so closely to the supernatural fact of Christ's incarnation.

The many attempts to translate verse 6 so as to get rid of the application of 'Mighty God,' 'Everlasting Father,' to Messiah, cannot here be enumerated or adequately discussed. I must be content with pointing out the significance of the august fourfold name of the victor King. It seems best to take the two first titles as a compound name, and so to recognise four such compounds.

There is a certain connection between the first and second of these which respectively lay stress on wisdom of plan and victorious energy of accomplishment, while the third and fourth are also connected, in that the former gathers into one great and tender name what Messiah is to His people, and the latter points to the character of His dominion throughout the whole earth. 'A wonder of a counsellor,' as the words may be rendered, not only suggests His giving wholesome direction to His people, but, still more, the mystery of the wisdom which guides His plans. Truly, Jesus purposes wonders in the depth of His redeeming design. He intends to do great things, and to reach them by a road which none would have imagined. The counsel to save a world, and that by dying for it, is the miracle of miracles. 'Who hath been His counsellor in that overwhelming wonder?' He needs no teacher; He is Himself the teacher of all truth.



All may have His direction, and they who follow it will not walk in darkness.

‘The mighty God.’ Chapter x. 21 absolutely forbids taking this as anything lower than the divine name. The prophet conceives of Messiah as the earthly representative of divinity, as having God with and in Him as no other man has. We are not to force upon the prophet the full new Testament doctrine of the oneness of the incarnate Word with the Father, which would be an anachronism. But we are not to fall into the opposite error, and refuse to see in these words, so startling from the lips of a rigid monotheist, a real prophecy of a divine Messiah, dimly as the utterer may have perceived the figure which he painted. Note, too, that the word ‘mighty’ implies victorious energy in battle. It is often applied to human heroes, and here carries warlike connotations, kindred with the previous picture of conflict and victory. Thus strength as of God, and, in some profound way, strength which is divine, will be the hand obeying the brain that counsels wonder, and all His plans shall be effected by it.

But these are not all His qualities. He is ‘the Father of Eternity’—a name in which tender care and immortal life are marvellously blended. This King will be in reality what, in old days, monarchs often called themselves and seldom were,—the Father of His people, with all the attributes of that sacred name, such as guidance, love, providing for His children’s wants. Nor can Christians forget that Jesus is the source of life to them, and that the name has thus a deeper meaning. Further, He is possessed of eternity. If He is so closely related to God as the former name implies, that predicate is not wonderful. Dying men need and

have an undying Christ. He is 'the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.'

The whole series of names culminates in 'the Prince of Peace,' which He is by virtue of the characteristics expressed in the foregoing names. The name pierces to the heart of Christ's work. For the individual He brings peace with God, peace in the else discordant inner nature, peace amid storms of calamity—the peace of submission, of fellowship with God, of self-control, of received forgiveness and sanctifying. For nations and civic communities He brings peace which will one day hush the tumult of war, and burn chariots and all warlike implements in the fire. The vision tarries, because Christ's followers have not been true to their Master's mission, but it comes, though its march is slow. We can hasten its arrival.

Verses 7 and 8 declare the perpetuity of Messiah's kingdom, His Davidic descent, and those characteristics of His reign, which guarantee its perpetuity. 'Judgment' which He exercises, and 'righteousness' which He both exercises and bestows, are the pillars on which His throne stands; and these are eternal, and it never will totter nor sink, as earthly thrones must do. The very life-blood of prophecy, as of religion, is the conviction that righteousness outlasts sin, and will survive 'the wreck of matter and the crash of worlds.'

The great guarantee for these glowing anticipations is that the 'zeal of the Lord of hosts' will accomplish them. *Zeal*, or rather *jealousy*, is love stirred to action by opposition. It tolerates no unfaithfulness in the object of its love, and flames up against all antagonism to the object. 'He that toucheth you, toucheth the apple of Mine eye.' So the subjects of that Messiah may be sure that a wall of fire is round about them, which

to foes without is terror and destruction, and to dwellers within its circuit glows with lambent light, and rays out beneficent warmth.

## LIGHT OR FIRE ?

'And the Light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame: and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day.'—ISAIAH x. 17.

WITH grand poetry the prophet pictures the Assyrian power as a forest consumed like thistles and briers by the fire of God. The text suggests solemn truths about the divine Nature and its manifestations.

### I. The Essential Character of God.

Light and Holiness are substantially parallel. Light symbolises purity, but also knowledge and joy. Holiness is Separation from Creatures, but chiefly from their Evils.

### II. The Different Attitudes which Men assume to that Character.

'Light of *Israel*': '*His* Holy One.'

God becomes ours, and we have an interest in that radiant Personality if we choose to claim it by faith, love, and obedience. We are free to accept God as ours or to reject Him.

### III. The Opposite Aspects which that Character accordingly assumes.

(a) The self-same divine Character has two effects according to the character of the beholder.

To those who respond to God's love it is—heaven. To those who are indifferent or alienated it may be pain, and will harm them if they see it and do not yield to it.

God's holiness is not retributive justice but moral perfectness, which to a good man will be joy, and to a bad man, intolerable.

The light which is gladsome to a healthy eye is agony to a diseased one.

(b) All the manifestations and operations of that divine Character have a twofold aspect. Christ is either a stone of stumbling or a sure foundation. Men are either the better or the worse for Him. The Gospel is the savour of life unto life or of death unto death. The tremendous 'either—or.' The Cross rejected harms the moral nature, hardens conscience, deepens condemnation.

All divine operations are necessarily on the side of God's lovers and against those who love Him not. They are contrary to Him, therefore He is so to them. 'With the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward.'

The final Judgment will be either rapture or despair, like the coming of a bridegroom, or the fiery rain that burnt up Sodom.

The very dew of Heavenly Bliss would be corroding poison to a godless spirit.

### THE SUCKER FROM THE FELLED OAK

'And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: 2. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; 3. And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: 4. But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. 5. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. 6. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. 7. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8. And

the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den. 9. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. 10. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.'—ISAIAH xi. 1-10.

THE hopeless fall of Assyria is magnificently pictured in the close of chapter x., as the felling of the cedars of Lebanon by the axe swung by Jehovah's own hand. A cedar once cut down puts out no new shoots; and so the Assyrian power, when it falls, will fall for ever. The metaphor is carried on with surpassing beauty in the first part of this prophecy, which contrasts the indestructible vitality of the Davidic monarchy with the irremediable destruction fated for its formidable antagonist. The one is a cedar, the stump of which rots slowly, but never recovers. The other is an oak, which, every woodman knows, will put out new growth from the 'stool.' But instead of a crowd of little suckers, the prophet sees but one shoot, and that rising to more than the original height and fruitfulness of the tree. The prophecy is distinctly that of One Person, in whom the Davidic monarchy is concentrated, and all its decadence more than recovered.

Isaiah does not bring the rise of the Messiah into chronological connection with the fall of Assyria; for he contemplates a period of decay for the Israelitish monarchy, and it was the very burden of his message as to Assyria that it should pass away without harming that monarchy. The contrast is not intended to suggest continuity in time. The period of fulfilment is entirely undetermined.

The first point in the prophecy is the descent of the Messiah from the royal stock. That is more than Isaiah's previous Messianic prophecies had told. He is to come at a time when the fortunes of David's house

were at their worst. There is to be nothing left but the stump of the tree, and out of it is to come a 'shoot,' slender and insignificant, and in strange contrast with the girth of the truncated bole, stately even in its mutilation. We do not talk of a growth from the stump as being a 'branch'; and 'sprout' would better convey Isaiah's meaning. From the top of the stump, a shoot; from the roots half buried in the ground, an outgrowth,—these two images mean but one person, a descendant of David, coming at a time of humiliation and obscurity. But this lowly shoot will 'bear fruit,' which presupposes its growth.

The King-Messiah thus brought on the scene is then described in regard to His character (v. 2), the nature of His rule (vs. 3-5), the universal harmony and peace which He will diffuse through nature (vs. 6-9), and the gathering of all mankind under His dominion. There is much in the prophetic ideal of the Messiah which finds no place in this prophecy. The gentler aspects of His reign are not here, nor the deeper characteristics of His 'spirit,' nor the chiefest blessings in His gift. The suffering Messiah is not yet the theme of the prophet.

The main point as to the character of the Messiah which this prophecy sets forth is that, whatever He was to be, He was to be by reason of the resting on Him of the Spirit of Jehovah. The directness, fulness, and continuousness of His inspiration are emphatically proclaimed in that word 'shall rest,' which can scarcely fail to recall John's witness, 'I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon Him.' The humanity on which the Divine Spirit uninterruptedly abides, ungrieved and unrestrained, must be free from the stains which so often drive

that heavenly visitant from our breasts. The white-breasted Dove of God cannot brood over foulness. There has never been but one manhood capable of receiving and retaining the whole fulness of the Spirit of God.

The gifts of that Spirit, which become qualities of the Messiah in whom He dwells, are arranged (if we may use so cold a word) in three pairs; so that, if we include the introductory designation, we have a seven-fold characterisation of the Spirit, recalling the seven lamps before the throne and the seven eyes of the Lamb in the Apocalypse, and symbolising by the number the completeness and sacredness of that inspiration. The resulting character of the Messiah is a fair picture of one who realises the very ideal of a strong and righteous ruler of men. 'Wisdom and understanding' refer mainly to the clearness of intellectual and moral insight; 'counsel and might,' to the qualities which give sound practical direction and vigour to follow, and carry through, the decisions of practical wisdom; while 'the knowledge and fear of the Lord' define religion by its two parts of acquaintance with God founded on love, and reverential awe which prompts to obedience. The fulfilment, and far more than fulfilment, of this ideal is in Jesus, in whom were 'hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' to whom no circumstances of difficulty ever brought the shadow of perplexity, who always saw clearly before Him the path to tread, and had always 'might' to tread it, however rough, who lived all His days in unbroken fellowship with the Father and in lowly obedience.

The prophet saw not all the wonders of perfect human character which that indwelling Spirit would

bring to realisation in Him; but what he saw was indispensable to a perfect King, and was, at all events, an arc of the mighty circle of perfection, which has now been revealed in the life of Jesus. The possibilities of humanity under the influence of the Divine Spirit are revealed here no less than the actuality of the Messiah's character. What Jesus is, He gives it to His subjects to become by the dwelling in them of the spirit of life which was in Him.

The rule of the King is accordant with His character. It is described in verses 3-5. The first characteristic named may be understood in different ways. According to some commentators, who deserve respectful consideration, it means, 'He shall draw His breath in the fear of Jehovah'; that is, that that fear has become, as it were, His very life-breath. But the meaning of 'breathing' is doubtful; and the phrase seems rather to express, as the Revised Version puts it, 'His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.' That might mean that those who fear Jehovah shall be His delight, and this would free the expression from any shade of tautology, when compared with the previous clause, and would afford a natural transition to the description of His rule. It might, on the other hand, continue the description of His personal character, and describe the inward cheerfulness of His obedience, like 'I delight to do Thy will.' In any case, the 'fear of the Lord' is represented as a sweet-smelling fragrance; and, if we adopt the former explanation, then it is almost a divine characteristic which is here attributed to the Messiah; for it is God to whom the fear of Him in men's hearts is 'an odour of a sweet smell.'

Then follow the features of His rule. His unerring judgment pierces through the seen and heard. That



is the quality of a monarch after the antique pattern, when kings were judges. It does not appear that the prophet rose to the height of perceiving the divine nature of the Messiah; but we cannot but remember how far the reality transcends the prophecy, since He whose 'eyes are as a flame of fire' knows what is in man, and the earliest prayers of the Church were addressed to Jesus as 'Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men.'

The relation of Messiah to two classes is next set forth. The oppressed and the meek shall have Him for their defender and avenger,—a striking contrast to the oppressive monarchs whom Isaiah had seen. We remember who said 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' 'Blessed are the meek.' The King Himself has taught us to deepen the meaning of the words of the prophet, and to find in them the expression of the law of His kingdom by which its blessings belong to those who know their need and come with humble hearts. But the same acts which are for the poor are against the oppressors. The emendation which reads 'tyrant' (*arits*) for 'earth' (*erets*) brings the two clauses descriptive of the punitive acts into parallelism, and is probably to be preferred. The same pillar was light to Israel and darkness to the Egyptians. Christ is the savour of life unto life and of death unto death. But what is His instrument of destruction? 'The rod of His mouth' or 'the breath of His lips.' And who is He whose bare word thus has power to kill and make alive? Is not this a divine prerogative? and does it not belong in the fullest sense to Him whose voice rebuked fevers, storms, and demons, and pierced the dull, cold ear of death? Further, righteousness, the absolute conformity of character and act to

the standard in the will of God, and faithfulness, the inflexible constancy, which makes a character consistent with itself, and so reliable, are represented by a striking figure as being twined together to make the girdle, which holds the vestments in place, and girds up the whole frame for effort. This righteous King 'shall not fail nor be discouraged.' He is to be reckoned on to the uttermost, or, as the New Testament puts it, He is 'the faithful and true witness.' This is the strong Son of God, who gathered all His powers together to run with patience the race set before Him, and to whom all may turn with the confidence that He is faithful 'as a Son over His own house,' and will inviolably keep the promise of His word and of His past acts.

We pass from the picture of the character and rule of the King over men to that fair vision of Paradise regained, which celebrates the universal restoration of peace between man and the animals. The picture is not to be taken as a mere allegory, as if 'lions' and 'wolves' and 'snakes' meant bad men; but it falls into line with other hints in Scripture, which trace the hostility between man and the lower creatures to sin, and shadow a future when 'the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.' The psalm which sings of man's dominion over the creatures is to be one day fulfilled; and the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches that it is already fulfilled in Christ, who will raise His brethren, for whom He tasted death, to partake in His dominion. The present order of things is transient; and if earth is to be, as some shadowy hints seem to suggest, the scene of the future glories of redeemed humanity, it may be the theatre of a fulfilment of such visions as this. But we cannot dogmatise on a subject of which we know so little, nor be sure of the extent to which

symbolism enters into this sweet picture. Enough that there surely comes a time when the King of men and Lord of nature shall bring back peace between both, and restore 'the fair music that all creatures made To their great Lord.'

Verse 10 begins an entirely new section, which describes the relations of Messiah's kingdom to the surrounding peoples. The picture preceding closed with the vision of the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord, and this verse proclaims the universality of Messiah's kingdom. By 'the root of Jesse' is meant, not the root from which Jesse sprang, but, in accordance with verse 1, the sprout from the house of Jesse. Just as in that verse the sprout was prophesied of as growing up to be fruitbearing, so here the lowly sucker shoots to a height which makes it conspicuous from afar, and becomes, like some tall mast, a sign for the nations. The contrast between the obscure beginning and the conspicuous destiny of Messiah is the point of the prophecy. 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.' Strange elevation for a king is a cross! But it is because He has died for men that He has the right to reign over them, and that they 'shall seek' to Him. 'His resting-place shall be glorious.'

The seat of His dominion is also the seat of His repose. The beneficent activity just described is wielded from a calm, central palace, and does not break the King's tranquillity. That is a paradox, except to those who know that Jesus Christ, sitting in undisturbed rest at the right hand of God, thence works with and for His servants. His repose is full of active energy; His active energy is full of repose. And that place of calm abode is 'glorious,' or, more emphatically and literally, 'glory.'

He shall dwell in the blaze of the uncreated glory of God,—a prediction which is only fulfilled in its true meaning by Christ's ascension and session at the right hand of God, in the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, and into which He has borne that lowly manhood which He drew from the cut-down stem of Jesse.

### THE WELL-SPRING OF SALVATION

'Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.'

ISAIAH xii. 3.

THERE are two events separated from each other by more than fifteen hundred years which have a bearing upon this prophecy: the one supplied the occasion for its utterance, the other claimed to be its interpretation and its fulfilment. The first of these is that scene familiar to us all, where the Israelites in the wilderness murmured for want of water, and the law-giver, being at his wits' end what to do with his troublesome charges, took his anxieties to God, and got for an answer the command to take with him the elders of Israel and his miracle-working rod, and to go to the rock, 'and the Lord shall stand upon the rock before thee and them, and the water shall flow forth.' It was not the rock, nor the rod, nor Moses and the elders, but the presence of God that brought the refreshing draught. And that that incident was in Isaiah's mind when he wrote our text is very clear to anybody who will observe that it occurs in the middle of a song of praise, which corresponds to the Israelites' song at the Red Sea after the destruction of Pharaoh, and is part of a great prophecy in which he describes God's future blessings

and mercies under images constantly drawn from the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus in the desert. Now, that interpretation, or rather that application, of the words of my text, was very familiar to the Jews long, long before the New Testament was thought about. For, as many of you will know, there came in the course of time a number of ceremonies to be added to a feast established by Moses himself—the Feast of Tabernacles. That was a feast in which the whole body of the Israelitish people dwelt for a week in leafy booths, in order to remind them of the time when they were wanderers in the wilderness; and as is usually the case, the ritual of the celebration developed a number of additional symbolical observances which were tacked on to it in the course of centuries. Amongst these there was this very memorable one: that on each of the days of the Feast of Tabernacles, at a given point in the ceremonial, the priests went from the temple, winding down the rocky path on the temple mountain, to the Pool of Siloam in the valley below, and there in their golden vases they drew the cool sparkling water, which they bore up, and amidst the blare of trumpets and the clash of cymbals poured it on the altar, whilst the people chanted the words of my text, ‘With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’

That ceremonial had been going on for eight hundred years from Isaiah’s time; and once more the period came round when it was to be performed; and on the seven days of the feast, punctually at the appointed time, the procession wound down the rocky slopes, drew the water in the golden vases, bore it up to the temple, and poured it upon the altar; and on the last great day of the feast, the same ceremonial went on

up to a given point; and just as the last rites of the chant of our text were dying on the ears, there was a little stir amidst the crowd, which parted to make way for him, and a youngish man, of mean appearance and rustic dress, stepped forward, and there, before all the gathered multitudes and the priests standing with their empty urns, symbol of the impotence of their system, 'on the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Brethren, such a commentary, at such a time, from such a commentator, may well absolve me from the necessity of enforcing the evangelistic bearing of the words of my text. And so, then, with that understanding of the deepest meaning of these words that we have to look at, I ask you to take them in the simplest possible way, and to consider three points: the Well of Salvation, the Act of Drawing the Water, the Gladness of those that draw. 'With *joy* shall *ye* draw water out of the fountains of salvation.'

Now, with regard to the first point, let me remind you to begin with, that the idea of the word here is not that which we attach to a well, but that which we attach to a spring. It does not describe the source of salvation as being a mere reservoir, still less as being a created or manufactured thing; but there lies in it the deep idea of a source from which the water wells up by its own inward energy. Then, when we have got that explanation, and the deep, full, pregnant meaning of the word salvation as a thing past, a thing present, a thing future, a thing which negatively delivers a man from all sin and sorrow, and a thing which positively endows a man with beauty, happiness, and holiness—when we have got that, then the

question next cries aloud for answer—this well-spring of salvation, is—what? Who? And the first answer and the last answer is GOD—GOD HIMSELF. It is no mere bit of drapery of the prophet's imagery, this well-spring of salvation; it is something much more substantial, much deeper than that. You remember the old psalm, 'With Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall we see light'; and what David and John after him called life, Isaiah and Paul after him calls salvation. And you remember too, no doubt, the indictment of another of the prophets, laying hold of the same metaphor in order to point to the folly and the suicide of all godless living: 'My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and they have hewn out for themselves broken cisterns.' They were manufactured articles, and because they were made they could be cracked, but the fountain, because it rises by its own inherent energy, springing up into everlasting life, is all-sufficient. God Himself is the well-spring of salvation.

If I had time to enlarge upon this idea, I might remind you how nobly and blessedly that principle is confirmed when we think of this great salvation, past, present, and future, negative and positive, all-sufficient and complete, as having its origin in His deep nature, as having its process in His own finished work, and as being in its essence the communication of Himself. That last thing I should like to say a word or two about. If there is a man or a woman that thinks of salvation as if it were merely a shutting up of some material hell, or the dodging round a corner so as to escape some external consequence of transgression, let him and her hear this: the possession of God is

salvation, that and nothing else. To have Him within me, that is to be saved; to have His life in His dear Son made the foundation of my life, to have my whole being penetrated and filled with God, that is the essence of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. And because it comes unmotived, uncaused, self-originated, springing up from the depths of His own heart; because it is all effected by His own mighty work who has trodden the winepress alone, and, single-handed, has wrought the salvation of the race; and because its essence and heart is the communication of God Himself, and the bestowing upon us the participation in a divine nature, therefore the depth of the thought, *God Himself* is the well-fountain of salvation.

But there is still another step to take. If these things which I have only just been able to glance at in the most superficial, and perhaps, therefore, confused manner, in any measure commend themselves to your judgments and your consciences, let me ask you to go with me one step further, and to figure to yourselves the significance and the strangeness of that moment to which I have already referred, when a man stood up in the temple court, and, with distinct allusion to the whole of the multitude of Old Testament sayings, in which God and the communication of God's own energy were represented as being the fountain of salvation and the salvation from the fountain, and said, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me.' Why, what a thing—let us put it into plain, vulgar English—what a thing for a man to say—'If any man thirst.' Who art Thou that dost thus plant Thyself opposite the race, sure that Thou hast no needs like them, but, contrariwise, canst refresh and satiate the thirsty lips



of them all? Who art Thou that dost proclaim Thyself as sufficient for the fruition of the mind that yearns for truth and thirsts for certitude, of the parched heart that wearies and cracks for want of love, of the will that longs to be rightly and lovingly commanded? Oh, dear brethren, not only the Titanic presumption of proposing oneself as enough for a single soul, but the inconceivable madness of proposing oneself as enough for all the race in all generations to the end of time, except on one hypothesis, marks this utterance of Him who has also said, 'I am meek and lowly of heart.' Strange lowliness! singular meekness! Who was He? Who is this that steps into the place that only a God can fill, and says, 'I can do it all. If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink'?

Dear brethren, some of us can, thank God, answer that question as I pray that every one of you may be able to answer it, 'Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ; Thou art the everlasting son of the Father. With Thee is the fountain of life; Thou Thyself art the living water.'

But I think there is a still further step to be taken. It is not only that our Lord Jesus Christ, in His nature, in His person, is the communicator of the divine life to man, just as—if you will let me take such a metaphor—just as up in the hills sometimes you will find some little tarn or loch all shut in; but having trickling from it a thread of limpid life, and, wherever it flows, the water of the loch goes; only, the one is lake and the other is river, and the latter is the medium of communication of the former to the thirsty pastures of the wilderness. And not only so, but—if I might venture to build upon a word of the context—there seems to be another consideration there. The words which precede

my text are a quotation from a song of the Israelites in their former Exodus: 'The Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation.' Now, if our Bible has been correct—and I do not enter upon that question—in emphasising the difference between *is* and *is become*, mark where it takes us. It takes us to this, that there was some single, definite, historical act wherein God *became* in an eminent manner and in reality what He had always been in purpose, intent, and idea. Then that to which my text originally alludes, to which it looks back, is the great deliverance wrought by the banks of the Red Sea. It was because Pharaoh and his hosts were drowned in it that Miriam and her musical sisters, with their timbrel and dance, not only said, 'The Lord *is* my strength,' but 'He *has become* my strength'—there where the corpses are floating yet. What answers to that in the matter with which we are concerned? Brethren, it is not enough to say that God is the fountain of salvation, it is not enough to say that the Incarnate Christ is the medium of salvation. Will you take the other step with us, and say that the Cross of Christ is the realisation of the divine intention of salvation? Then He, who from everlasting was the strength and song of all the strong and the songful, *is become* the salvation of all the lost, and the fountain is 'opened for sin and for uncleanness.' A definite, historical act, the manifestation of Jesus Christ, is the bringing to man of the salvation of God. So much, then, for that first point to which I desired to ask your attention.

And now let me say a word or two as to the second. I wish to speak about this process of drawing from the fountain. That metaphor, without any further explanation, might very naturally suggest more idea

of human effort than in reality belongs to it. Men have said: 'Yes; no doubt God is the fountain of salvation; no doubt Christ is the river of salvation; no doubt His death is the opening of the fountain for sin and for uncleanness; but how am I to bring myself into contact and connection with it?' And there have been all sorts of answers. Every kind of pump has been resorted to. Go up to the Agricultural Hall and you will see no end of contrivances for bringing water to the surface. There are not so many there as men have found out for themselves to bring the water of salvation to their lips, and the effect has always been the same. There has been something wrong with the valves; the pump has not worked properly; there has been something wrong with the crank; the pipe has not gone down to the water; and there has been nothing but a great jingling of empty buckets, and aching and wearied elbows, and what the woman said to Christ has been true all round, 'Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep.' Ay! thank God, it *is* deep; and if we let our Lord be His own interpreter, we have only to put together three sayings of His in order to come to the true meaning of this metaphor. My text says, 'With joy ye shall draw water'; and Christ, sitting at the well of Samaria—what a strange combination of the weakness and the weariness of manhood and the strength and self-consciousness of Divinity was there!—wearied with His journey, said, 'If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give Me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of Him and He would have given thee living water.' So, then, drawing is asking. That is step number one.

Take another word of the Master's that I have

already quoted for other purposes, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' So, then, drawing, or asking, or coming are all equivalent. That is step number two.

And, then, take another word. 'He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.' So, then, drawing, asking, coming, all melt into the one simple word—believing. Trust in Him, and thou hast come, thou hast asked, thou hast drawn, thou dost possess.

But whilst I would lay the foundation thus broad, thus simple, do not forget, dear brethren, what I was saying about a definite historical act. You will hear people say, 'Oh, I trust in Christ!' What do you trust in Christ? You will hear people say, 'Oh, I look to the goodness of God.' Be it so. God forbid I should say a word to prevent that; but what I would insist upon is that a mere vague regard to a vague Christ is not the faith that is equivalent to drawing from the fountain of salvation. There must be a further object in a faith that saves. It must lay hold of the definite historical act in which Christ has become the salvation of the world.

Do not take it upon my words, take it upon His own. He once said to His fellow-countrymen in His lifetime, 'I am the living bread'; and many of our modern teachers would go that length heartily. Was that where Christ stopped? By no means. Was His Gospel a gospel of incarnation only? Certainly not. 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven.' Anything more? Yes; this more, 'and the bread which I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. He that eateth Me he shall live by Me.' 'Well,' say some people, 'that means following His

example, accepting His teaching, being loyal to His Person, absorbing His Spirit.' Yes, it means all that; but is that all it means? Take His own commentary: 'He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood, hath eternal life.' Yes, brethren, a Christ incarnate, blessed be God! A Christ crucified, blessed be God! And not the one but *both* must be the basis of our faith and our hope.

Now, will you let me say one thing about this matter of drawing the water? It is an act of faith in a whole Jesus, and eminently in the mighty act and sacrifice of His Cross. But to go back again to the context: 'He also is become *my* salvation.' That is what I desire, God helping me, to lay on the hearts of all my hearers—that a definite act of faith in Christ crucified is not enough unless it is a personal act, unless it is what our old Puritan forefathers used to call 'appropriating faith.' Never mind about the somewhat dry and technical phraseology; the thing is what I insist upon—'*my* salvation.' O brother! what does it matter though all Niagara were roaring past your door; you might die of thirst all the same unless you put your own lips to it. Down on your knees like Gideon's men; it is safest there; that is the only attitude in which a man can drink of this fountain. Down on your knees and put your lips to it—your very own lips—and drink for your own soul's salvation. Christ died for the world. Yes; but the world for which Christ died is made up of individuals who were in His heart. It is Paul's words that I would beseech you to make your own: 'The Son of God, who loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*.' Every one of you is entitled to say that, if you will. You remember that verse filled with adoring contemplation that we

sometimes sing, one word in which seems to me to be coloured by the too sombre doctrine of the epoch from which it came :—

‘ My soul looks back to see  
The burden Thou didst bear,  
When hanging on the accursed tree,  
And *knows* her guilt was there.’

‘ He also is my strength and my song. He is become my salvation ; therefore, in joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’

Now, I have left myself no time to do more than say one word about that last point, the gladness of the water-drawers. It is a pretty picture in our text, full of the atmosphere and spirit of Eastern life : the cheery talk and the ringing laughter round the village well, where the shepherds with their flocks linger all day long, and the maidens from their tents come—a kind of rude Exchange in the antique world ; and, says our prophet, ‘ As the dwellers in the land at their village springs, so ye, the weary travellers at “ the eye of the desert,” will draw with gladness.’ So we have this joy.

Dear brethren, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for something better than to make us glad, but it is meant to make us glad too, and he is but a very poor Christian who has not found that it is the joy and rejoicing of his heart. We need not put too much emphasis and stress upon that side of the truth ; but we need not either suppress it or disregard it in our modern high-flown disinterestedness. There are joys worth calling so which only come from possessing this fountain of salvation. How shall I enumerate them ? The best way, I think, will be to quote passages.

There is the gladness of forgiven sin and a quieted conscience: 'Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.' There is the joy of a conscious possession of God: 'Blessed are the people that know the joyful sound; they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance. In Thy name shall they rejoice all the day.' There is the joy of fellowship and communion with Jesus Christ and His full presence: 'I will see you again; and your hearts shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh away from you.' There is the joy of willing obedience: 'I delight to do Thy will.' 'It is joy to the just to do judgment.' There is the joy of a bright hope of an inheritance 'incorruptible,' 'wherein ye greatly rejoice,' and there is a joy which, like that Greek fire they talk about, burns brighter under water, and glows as the darkness deepens—a joy which is independent of circumstances, and can say, 'Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.'

And all that, brother and friend, may be yours and mine; and then what this same prophet says may also be true: 'The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads'—that is for the pilgrimage; 'They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away'—that is for the home. There is another prophecy in this same book of Isaiah: 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters'; that was the voice of the Christ in prophecy. There is a saying spoken in the temple courts: 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink'; that was the voice of the Christ upon earth. There is a saying at the end of Scripture—almost the last words that the Seer in

Patmos heard: 'Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely'; that was the voice of the Christ from the throne. And the triple invitation comes to every soul of man in the world, and to thee, and thee, and thee, my brother. Answer, answer as the Samaritan woman did: 'Sir, give me this water that I thirst not, neither come hither' any more to draw of the broken cisterns.

### THE HARVEST OF A GODLESS LIFE

'Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the Rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips: In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow.'—ISAIAH xvii. 10, 11.

THE original application of these words is to Judah's alliance with Damascus, which Isaiah was dead against. He saw that it would only precipitate the Assyrian invasion, as in fact it did. Judah had forsaken God, and because they had done so, they had gone to seek for themselves delights—alliance with Damascus. The image of planting a garden of pleasures, and 'vine slips of a stranger' refers to sensuous idolatry as well as to the entangling alliance. Then follows a contemptuous description of the rapid growth of this alliance and of the care with which Israel cultivated it. 'In a day thou makest thy plant to grow' (or fencest it), and next morning it was in blossom, so sedulously had they nursed and fostered it. Then comes the smiting contrast of what it was all for—'A harvest heap in the day of sickness and incurable pain.'

Now we may take this in a more general way as



containing large truths which affect the life of every one of us.

### I. The Sin of a Godless Life.

(a) Notice the Sin charged. It is merely negative—*forgettest*. There is no charge of positive hostility or of any overt act. This forgetfulness is most natural and easy to be fallen into. The constant pressure of the world. It indicates alienation of heart from God.

It is most common among us, far more so than active infidelity, far more so than gross sin, far more so than conscious hostility.

(b) The implied Criminality of it. He is the 'Rock of thy strength' and the 'God of thy salvation.' Rock is the grand Old Testament name of God, expressing in a pregnant metaphor both what He is in Himself and what in relation to those who trust Him. It speaks of stability, elevation, massiveness, and of defence and security. The parallel title sets Him forth as the Giver of salvation; and both names set in clear light the sinful ingratitude of forgetting God, and force home the question: 'Do ye thus requite the Lord, oh foolish people and unwise?'

(c) The implied Absurdity of it. What a contrast between the safe 'munitions of rocks' and the unsheltered security of these Damascene gardens! What fools to leave the heights and come down into the plain! Think of the contrast between the sufficiency of God and the emptiness of the substitutes. Forgetfulness of Him and preference of creatures cannot be put into language which does not convict it of absurdity.

### II. The Busy Effort and Apparent Success of a Godless Life.

(a) If a man loses his hold on God and has not Him

to stay himself on, he is driven to painful efforts to make up the loss. God is needed by every soul. If the soul is not satisfied in Him, then there are hungry desires. This is the explanation of the feverish activity of much of our life.

(b) Such work is far harder than the work of serving God. It takes a great deal of toil to make that garden grow. The world is a hard taskmaster. God's service is easy. He sets us in Eden to till and dress it, but when we forget Him, the ground is cursed, and bears thorns and thistles, and sweat drips from our brows.

Men take more pains to damn themselves than to save themselves. There is nothing more wearying than the pursuit of pleasure. 'Pleasant plants'—that is a hopeless kind of gardening. There is nothing more degrading.

'Ye lust and desire to have,'—what a contrast is in, Ask and have! We might live even as the lilies or the ravens, or with only this difference, that we laboured, but were as uncaring and as peaceful as they.

God is *given*. The world has to be *bought*. Its terms are 'Nothing for nothing.'

(c) Such work has sometimes quick, present success.

'In the day.' It is hard for men to labour towards far-off unseen good. We like to have what will grow up in a night, like Jonah's gourd. So these present satisfactions in a worldly life appeal to worldly, sensuous natures. And it is hard to set over against these a plant which grows slowly, and only bears fruit in the next world.

III. The End of it all.

'A harvest heap in the day of grief.' This clearly

points on to a solemn ending—the day of judgment.

(a) How poor the fruit will be that a God-forgetting man will take out of life! There is but *one heap* from all the long struggle. He has ‘sowed much and brought home little.’ What shall we take with us out of our busy years as their net result? A very small sack will be large enough to hold the harvest that many of us have reaped.

(b) All this God-forgetting life of pleasure-seeking and idolatry is bringing on a terrible, inevitable consummation.

‘Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.’

No doubt there is often a harvest of grief and desperate sorrow springing, even in this life, from forgetting God. For it is only they who set their hopes on Him that are never disappointed, and only they who have chosen Him for their portion who can always say, ‘I have a goodly heritage.’ But the real harvest is not reaped till death has separated the time of sowing from that of ingathering. The sower shall reap; *i.e.* every man shall inherit the consequences of his deeds. ‘They that have planted it shall eat it.’

(c) That harvest home will be a day of sadness to some. These are terrible words—‘grief and desperate sorrow,’ or ‘pain and incurable sickness.’ We dare not dilate on this. But if we trust in Christ and sow to the Spirit, we shall then ‘rejoice before God as with the joy of harvest,’ and ‘return with joy, bringing our sheaves with us.’

## ‘IN THIS MOUNTAIN’

‘In this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. 7. And He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. 8. He will swallow up death in victory.’—ISAIAH XXV. 6-8.

A POET’S imagination and a prophet’s clear vision of the goal to which God will lead humanity are both at their highest in this great song of the future, whose winged words make music even in a translation. No doubt it starts from the comparatively small fact of the restoration of the exiled nation to its own land. But it soars far beyond that. It sees all mankind associated with them in sharing their blessings. It is the vision of God’s ideal for humanity. That makes it the more remarkable that the prophet, with this wide outlook, should insist with such emphasis on the fact that it has a local centre. That phrase ‘in this mountain’ is three times repeated in the hymn; two of the instances occurring in the verses of my text have lying side by side with them the expressions ‘all people’ and ‘all nations,’ as if to bring together the local origin, and the universal extent, of the blessings promised.

The sweet waters that are to pour through the world well up from a spring opened ‘in this mountain.’ The beams that are to lighten every land stream out from a light blazing there. The world’s hopes for that golden age which poets have sung, and towards which earnest social reformers have worked, and of the coming of which this prophet was sure, rest on a definite fact, done in a definite place, at a definite time. Isaiah knew the place, but what was to be done, or when it was to be done, he knew not. You and I

ought to be wiser. History has taught us that Jesus Christ fulfils the visioned good that inspired the prophet's brilliant words. We might say, with allowable licence, that 'this mountain,' in which the Lord does the great things that this song magnifies, is not so much Zion as Calvary.

Brethren, in these days, when so many voices are proclaiming so many short cuts to the Millennium, this clear declaration of the source of the world's hope is worth pondering. For us all, individually, this localisation of the origin of the universal good of mankind is an offer of blessings to us if we will go thither, where the provision for the world's good is stored—'In this mountain'; therefore, to seek it anywhere else is to seek it in vain.

Now, I wish, under the impression of that conviction, to put before you just these three thoughts: where the world's food comes from; where the unveiling which gives light to the world comes from; and where the life which destroys death for the world comes from—'In this mountain.'

I. Where does the world's food come from?

Physiologists can tell, by studying the dentition—the system of the teeth—and the digestive apparatus of an animal, what it is meant to live upon, whether vegetables or flesh, or a mingled diet of both. And you can tell, if you will, by studying yourself, what, or whom, you are meant to live upon. The poet said, 'We live by admiration, hope, and love.' But he did not say on what these faculties, which truly nourish man's spirit, are to fix and fasten. He tells of the appetites; he does not tell of their food. My text does: 'In this mountain shall the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the

lees well refined.' Friends, look at these hearts of yours with their yearnings, with their passionate desires, with their clamant needs. Will any human love—the purest, the sweetest, the most unselfish, the most utter in its surrender—satisfy the heart-hunger of the poorest of us? No! Look at the capacities of grasping thought and truth in our spirits, which are ever seek, seek, seeking for absolutely certain foundations on which we may build the whole structure of our beliefs. You have to go deeper down than the sand of man's thinkings and teachings before you can reach what will bear without shifting the foundations of a life's credence and confidence. Look at these tumultuous wills of ours that fancy they crave to be independent, and really crave an absolute master whom it is blessedness to obey. You will find none such beneath the stars. The very elements of our being, our heart, will, mind, desires, passions, longings, all with one voice proclaim that the only food for a man is God.

Jesus Christ brings the food that we need. Remember His own adaptation of this great vision of my text in more than one parable; such as the supper that was provided, and to which all men were invited, and, 'with one consent,' declined the invitation. Remember His own utterance, 'I am the Bread of God which came down from heaven to give life to the world.' Remembering such words, let me plead with you to listen to the voice of warning as well as of invitation, which sounds from Cradle and Cross and Throne. 'Why will ye spend your money for that which is not bread'—you know it is not—'and your labour for that which satisfieth not?'—you know it does not. Turn to Him, 'eat, and your souls shall

live.' 'In this mountain is prepared a feast . . . for all nations.'

Notice that although it does not appear on the surface, and to English readers, this world's festival, in which every want is met, and every appetite satisfied, is a feast on a sacrifice. That touches the deepest need, about which I shall have a word or two to say presently. But in the meantime let me just press this upon you, that the Christ who died on the Cross is to be lived on by us; and that it is His sacrifice that is to be the nourishment of our spirits.

Would that the earnest men, who are trying to cure the world's evils and to still the world's wants, and are leaving Jesus Christ and His religion out of their programme, would take thought and ask themselves whether there is not something more in the hunger of humanity than their ovens can ever bake bread for! They are spinning ropes of sand, if they are trying to lift the world clear of its miseries and of its hunger, and are not presenting Jesus Christ. I hope I am no bigot; I know that I sympathise earnestly with all these other schemes for helping mankind, but this I am bound to say here—all of them put together will not reach the need of the case, unless they start from, and are subsidiary to, and develop out of, the presenting of the primal supply for the universal want, Christ, who alone is able to still the hunger of men's hearts. Education will do much, but university degrees and the highest culture will not satisfy a hungry heart. Fitting environment, as it is fashionable to call it, will do a great deal, but nothing outside of a man will staunch his evils or still the hunger that coils and grips in his heart. Competent wealth is a good—there is no need to say that in Manchester—but millionaires

have been known to be miserable. A heart at rest in the love of husband, wife, parent, child, is a blessing earnestly to be sought and thankfully to be treasured by us all; but there is more than that wanted. Put a man in the most favourable circumstances; give him competent worldly means; do all that modern philosophers who leave religion out of the question are trying to do; put in practice your most advanced Socialistic schemes, and you will still have a man with a hungry heart. He may not know what he wants; very often he will entirely mistake what that is, but he will be restless for want of an unknown good. Here is the only thing that will still his heart: 'The bread which I give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.'

Brother and sister, this is not a matter only for social reformers, and to be dealt with as bearing upon wide movements that influence multitudes. It comes home to you and me. Some of you do not in the least degree know what I am talking about when I speak of the hunger of men's hearts; for you have lost your appetites, as children that eat too many sweets have no desire for their wholesome meals. You have lost your appetite by feeding upon garbage, and you say you are quite content. Yes, at present; but deep down there lies in your hearts a need which will awake and speak out some day; and you will find that the husks which the swine did eat are scarcely wholesome nutriment for a man. And there are some of you that turn away with disgust, and I am glad of it, from these low, gross, sensuous delights; and are trying to satisfy yourselves with education, culture, refinement, art, science, domestic love, wealth, gratified ambition, or the like. There are tribes of degraded



Indians that in times of famine eat clay. There is a little nourishment in it, and it distends their stomachs, and gives them the feeling of having had a meal. And that is like what some of you do. Dear friends, will you listen to this?—'Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?' Will you listen to this?—'I am the Bread of Life.' Will you listen to this?—'In this mountain will the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things.'

II. Where does the unveiling that gives light to the world come from?

My text, as I have already remarked, emphatically repeats 'in this mountain' in its next clause. 'He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.'

Now, of course, the pathetic picture that is implied here, of a dark pall that lies over the whole world, suggests the idea of mourning, but still more emphatically, I think, that of obscuration and gloom. The veil prevents vision and shuts out light, and that is the picture of humanity as it presents itself before this prophet—a world of men entangled in the folds of a dark pall that lay over their heads, and swathed them round about, and prevented them from seeing; shut them up in darkness and entangled their feet, so that they stumbled in the gloom. It is a pathetic picture, but it does not go beyond the realities of the case. For, with all our light on other matters, with all our freedom of action, with all our frequent forgetfulness of the fact that we are thus encompassed, it remains true that, apart from the emancipation and illumination that are effected by Jesus Christ, this is the picture of mankind as they are. And you are beneath that

veil, and swathed, obstructively as regards light and liberty, by its heavy folds, unless Christ has freed you.

But we must go a step further than that, I think; and although one does not wish to force too much meaning on to a poetic metaphor, still I cannot help supposing that that universal pall, as I called it, which is cast over all nations, has a very definite and a very tragic meaning. There is a universal fact of human experience which answers to the figure, and that is sin. That is the black thing whose ebon folds hamper us, and darken us, and shut out the visions of God and blessedness, and all the glorious blue above us. The heavy, dark mist settles down on the plains, though the sky above is undimmed by it, and the sun is blazing in the zenith. Not one beam can penetrate through the wet, chill obstruction, and men stumble about in the fog with lamps and torches, and all the while a hundred feet up it is brightness and day. Or, if at some points the obstruction is thinned and the sun does come through, it is shorn of all its gracious beams and power to warm and cheer, and looks but like a copper-coloured, livid, angry ball. So 'the veil that is spread over all nations,' that awful fact of universal sinfulness, shuts out God—who is our light and our joy—from us, and no other lights or joys are more than twinkling tapers in the mist. Or it makes us see Him as men in a fog see the sun—shorn of His graciousness, threatening, wrathful, unlovely.

Brethren, the fact of universal sinfulness is the outstanding fact of humanity. Jesus Christ deals with it by His death, which is God's sacrifice and the world's atonement. That Lamb of God has borne away the world's sins, and my sins and thy sins are there. By the fact of His death He has rent the veil from the top

to the bottom, and the light comes in, unhindered by the terrible solemn fact that all of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God. By His life He communicates to each of us, if we will trust our poor sinful souls to Him, a new power of living which is triumphant over temptation, and gives the victory over sin if we will be true to Him. And so the last shreds of the veil, like the torn clouds of a spent thunderstorm, are parted into filmy rags and float away below the horizon, leaving the untarnished heavens and the flaming sunshine; and 'we with unveiled faces' can lift them up to be irradiated by the light. 'In this mountain will the Lord destroy the covering that is spread over all nations.'

The weak point of all these schemes and methods to which I have already referred for helping humanity out of the slough, and making men happier, is that they underestimate the fact of sin. If a man comes to them and says, 'I have broken God's law. What am I to do? I have a power within me that impels me now to evil. How am I to get rid of it?' they have no adequate answer. There is only one remedy that deals radically with the fact of human transgression; only one power that will deliver each of us, if we will, from the penalty, the guilt, the power of sin; and that is the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, and its result, the inspiration of the spirit of life that was in Jesus Christ, breathed into us from the Throne itself. Thus, and thus only, is the veil done away in Christ.

III. Lastly, where does the life that destroys death come from?

'He will swallow up death in victory,' or, as probably the word more correctly means, 'He will swallow up death *for ever.*' None of the other panaceas

for the world's evils that I have been speaking of even attempt to deal with that 'Shadow feared of Man' that sits at the end of all our paths. Jesus Christ has dealt with it. Like the warrior of Judah who went down into a pit and slew a lion, He has gone down into the lair of the dreadful thing, and has come up leaving Death dead on the threshold.

By His death Christ has so altered that grim fact, which awaits us all, that to those who will trust their souls to Him it ceases to be death, even though the physical fact remains unaltered. For what is death? Is it simply the separation of soul from body, the cessation of corporeal existence? Surely not. We have to add to that all the spiritual tremors, all the dreads of passing into the unknown, and leaving this familiar order of things, and all the other reluctances and half-conscious feelings which make the difference between the death of a man and the death of a dog. And all these are swept clean away, if we believe that Jesus died, and died as our Redeemer and our Saviour. So, unconsciously and instinctively, the New Testament writers will seldom condescend to call the physical fact by the ugly old name. It has changed its character; it is 'a sleep' now; it is 'an exodus,' a 'going out' from the land of Egypt into a land of peace. It is a plucking up of the tent-pegs, according to another of the words which the writers employ for death, in preparation for entering, when the 'tabernacle is dissolved,' into 'a house not made with hands,' a statelier edifice, 'eternal in the heavens.' To die in Christ is not to die, but becomes a mere change of condition and of place, to be with Him, which is far 'better.' So an Apostle who was coming within measurable distance of his own martyrdom, even whilst the heads-

man's block was all but in his sight, said: 'He hath abolished death,' the physical fact remaining still.

By His resurrection Jesus Christ has established immortality as a certainty for men. I can understand a man, who has persuaded himself that when he dies he is done with, dressing his limbs to die without dread if without hope. But that is a poor victory over death, which, even in the act of getting rid of the fear of it, invests it with supreme and ultimate power over humanity. Surely, surely, to believe that the grave is a blind alley, with no exit at the other end,—to believe that, however it may minister to a quiet departure, is no victory over the grave. But to die believing, on the other hand, that it is only a short tunnel through which we pass, and come out into fairer lands on the other side of the mountains, is to conquer that last foe even while it seems to conquer us.

Jesus Christ, who died that we might never die, lives that we may always live. For His immortal life will give to each of us, if we join ourselves to Him by simple faith and lowly obedience, an immortal life that shall persist through, and be increased by, the article of bodily death. And when we pass into the higher realm of fulness of joy, then—as Paul quotes the words of my text—'shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.'

Dear brethren, gather all these thoughts together. Do they not plead with you to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ, and to turn to Him alone? He will give you the food of your souls; if you will not sit at His table you will starve. He will strip you of the covering that is cast over you, as over us all; if you will not let Him unwind its folds from your limbs, then like the

clothes of a drowning man, they will sink you. He will give you immortal life, which laughs at death, and you will be able to take up the great song, 'O Death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory? . . . Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory.' 'In this mountain,' and in this mountain only, are the food, the illumination, the life of the world. I beseech you, do not turn away from them, lest you stumble on the dark mountains, where are starvation and gloom and death, but rather join that happy company of pilgrims who sing as they march, 'Come! let us go up to the mountain of the Lord. He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths.'

### THE FEAST ON THE SACRIFICE

'And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast.'

ISAIAH XXV. 6.

THERE is here a reference to Sinai, where a feast followed the vision of God. It was the sign of covenant, harmony, and relationship, and was furnished by a sacrifice.

I. The General Ideas contained in this Image of a Feast.

We meet it all through Scripture; it culminates in Christ's parables and in the 'Marriage Supper of the Lamb.'

In the image are suggested:—

Free familiarity of access, fellowship, and communion with Him.

Abundant Supply of all wants and desires.

Festal Joy.

Family Intercommunion.

II. The Feast follows on Sacrifice.

We find that usage of a feast following a sacrifice existing in many races and religions. It seems to witness to a widespread consciousness of sin as disturbing our relations with God. These could be set right only by sacrifice, which therefore must precede all joyful communion with Him.

The New Testament accepts that truth and clears it from the admixture of heathenism.

God provides the Sacrifice.

It is not brought by man. There is no need for our efforts—no atonement to be found by us.

The sacrifice is not meant to turn aside God's wrath.

Communion is possible through Christ.

In Him God is revealed.

Objective hindrances are taken away.

Subjective ones are removed.

Dark fears—indifference—dislike of fellowship—Sin—these make communion with God impossible.

At Sinai the elders 'saw God, and did eat and drink.' Here the end of the preceding chapter shows the 'elders' gazing on the glory of Jehovah's reign in Zion.

III. The Feast consists of a Sacrifice.

Christ is the food of our souls. He and His work are meant to nourish our whole being. He is the object for all our nature.

The Sacrifice must be incorporated with us. It is not enough that it be offered, it must also be partaken of.

Now the Sacrifice is eaten by faith, and by occupation with it of each part of our being, according to its own proper action. Through love, obedience, hope, desire, we may all feed on Jesus.

The Lord's Supper presents the same thoughts, under similar symbols, as Isaiah expressed in his prophecy.

Symbolically we feast on the sacrifice when we eat the Bread which is the Body broken for us. But the true eating of the true sacrifice is by faith. *Crede et manducasti*—Believe, and thou hast eaten.

### THE VEIL OVER ALL NATIONS

‘He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.’—ISAIAH XXV. 7.

THE previous chapter closes with a prediction of the reign of Jehovah in Mount Zion ‘before His elders’ in Glory. The allusion apparently is to the elders being summoned up to the Mount and seeing the Glory, ‘as the body of heaven in its clearness.’ The veil in this verse is probably a similar allusion to that which covered Moses’ face. It will then be an emblem of that which obscures for ‘all nations the face of God.’ And what is that but sin?

#### I. Sin veils God from men’s sight.

It is not the necessary inadequacy of the finite mind to conceive of the Infinite that most tragically hides God from us. That inadequacy is compatible with true and sufficient knowledge of Him. Nor is it ‘the veils of flesh and sense,’ as we often hear it said, that hide Him. But it is our sinful moral nature that darkens His face and dulls our eyes. ‘Knowledge’ of God, being knowledge of a Person, is not merely an intellectual process. It is much more truly acquaintance than comprehension; and as such, requires, as all acquaintance does, some foundation of sympathy and appreciation.

Every sin darkens the witness to God in ourselves. In a pure nature, conscience would perfectly reveal God; but we all know too sadly and intimately how it



is gradually silenced, and fails to discriminate between what pleases and what displeases God. In a pure nature, the obedient Will would perfectly reveal God and the man's dependence on Him. We all know how sin weakens that.

Every sin diminishes our power of seeing Him in His external Revelation. Every sin ruffles the surface of the soul, which is a mirror reflecting the light that streams from Creation, from Providence, from History. A mass of black rock flung into a still lake shatters the images of the girdling woods and the overarching sky.

Every sin bribes us to forget God. It becomes our interest, as we fancy, to shut Him out of our thoughts. Adam's impulse is to carry his guilty secret with him into hiding among the trees of the garden. We cannot shake off His presence, but we can—and when we have sinned, we have but too good reason to exercise the power—we can dismiss the thought of Him. 'They did not *like* to retain God in their knowledge.'

Individual sins may seem of small moment, but an opaque veil can be woven out of very fine thread.

## II. To veil God from our sight is fatal.

We imagine that to forget Him leaves us undisturbed in following aims disapproved by Him, and we spend effort to secure that false peace by fierce absorption in other pursuits, and impatient shaking off of all that might wake our sleeping consciousness of Him.

But what unconscious self-murder that is, which we take such pains to achieve! To know God is life eternal; to lose Him from our sight is to condemn all that is best in our nature, all that is most conducive to blessedness, tranquillity, and strenuousness in our lives, to languish and die. Every creature separated from

God is cut off from the fountain of life, and loses the life it drew from the fountain, of whatever kind that life is. And that in man which is most of kin with God languishes most when so cut off. And when we have blocked Him out from our field of vision, all that remains for us to look at suffers degradation, and becomes phantasmal, poor, unworthy to detain, and impotent to satisfy, our hungry vision.

### III. The Veil is done away in Christ.

He shows us God, instead of our own false conceptions of Him, which are but distorted refractions of His true likeness. Only within the limits of Christ's revelation is there knowledge of God, as distinguished from guesses, doubtful inferences, partial glimpses. Elsewhere, the greatest certitude as to Him is a 'peradventure'; Jesus alone says 'Verily, verily.'

Jesus makes us able to see God.

Jesus makes us delight in seeing Him.

All dread of the 'steady whole of the Judge's face' is changed to the loving heart's joy in seeing its Beloved.

### IV. The Veil is wholly removed hereafter.

The prophecy from which the text is taken is obviously not yet fulfilled. It waits for the perfect condition of redeemed manhood in another life. But even then, the chief reason why the Christian is warranted in cherishing an unpresumptuous hope that he will know even as he is known is not that then he will have dropped the veil of flesh and sense, but that he will have dropped the thicker, more stifling covering of sin, and, being perfectly like God, will be able perfectly to gaze on Him, and, perfectly gazing on Him, will grow ever more perfectly like Him.

The choice for each of us is whether the veil will

thicken till it darkens the Face altogether, and that is death; or whether it will thin away till the last filmy remnant is gone, and 'we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.'

### THE SONG OF TWO CITIES

'In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. 2. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in. 3. Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee; because he trusteth in Thee. 4. Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength: 5. For He bringeth down them that dwell on high; the lofty city, He layeth it low; He layeth it low, even to the ground He bringeth it even to the dust. 6. The foot shall tread it down, even the feet of the poor, and the steps of the needy. 7. The way of the just is uprightness: Thou, most upright, dost weigh the path of the just. 8. Yea, in the way of Thy judgments, O Lord, have we waited for Thee; the desire of our soul is to Thy name, and to the remembrance of Thee. 9. With my soul have I desired Thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek Thee early: for when Thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness. 10. Let favour be shewed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord.'—ISAIAH xxvi. 1-10.'

'THIS song' is to be interpreted as a song, not with the cold-blooded accuracy proper to a scientific treatise. The logic of emotion is as sound as that of cool intellect, but it has its own laws and links of connection.

First, the song sets in sharp contrast the two cities, describing, in verses 1-4, the city of God, its strength, defences, conditions of citizenship, and the peace which reigns within its walls; and in verses 5 and 6 the fall and utter ruin of the robber city, its antagonist. Jerusalem, on its rocky peninsula, supplies the form of Isaiah's thought; but it is only a symbol of the true city of God, the stable, invisible, but most real, polity and order of things to which men, even while wandering lonely and pilgrims, do come, if they will. It is possible even here and now to have our citizenship in the heavens, and to feel that we belong to a great com-

munity beyond the sea of time, though our feet have never trodden its golden pavements, nor our eyes seen its happy glories.

In one aspect, it is ideal, but in truth it is more real than the intrusive and false things of this fleeting present, which call themselves realities. 'The things which are' are the things above. The things here are but shows and shadows.

The city's walls are salvation. There is no need to name the architect of these fortifications. One hand only can pile their strength. God appoints salvation in lieu of all visible defences. Whom He purposes to save are saved. Whom He wills to keep safe are kept safe. They who can shelter behind that strong defence need no other. Weak, sense-governed hearts may crave something more palpable, but they do not really need it. A parapet on an Alpine road gives no real security, but only satisfies imagination. The sky needs no pillars to hold it up.

Then an unknown voice breaks in upon the song, calling on unnamed attendants to fling wide the gates. The city is conceived of as empty; its destined inhabitants must have certain qualifications. They must be righteous, and must 'keep faithfulness,' being true to the God who is 'faithful and true' in all His relations. None but the righteous can dwell in conscious citizenship with the Unseen while here, and none but the righteous can enter through the gates into the city. That requirement is founded in the very nature of the case, and is as emphatically proclaimed by the gospel as by the prophet. But the gospel tells more articulately than he was enlightened to do, how righteousness is to be won. The last vision of the Apocalypse, which is so like this song in its central

idea, tells us of the fall of Babylon, of the descent to earth of the New Jerusalem, and leaves as its last message the great saying, 'Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may . . . enter in through the gate into the city.'

Our song gives some hint of similar thoughts by passing from the description of the qualifications for entrance to the celebration of the security which comes from trust. The safety which is realised within the walls of the strong city is akin to the 'perfect peace' in which he who trusts is kept; and the juxtaposition of the two representations is equivalent to the teaching that trust, which is precisely the same as the New Testament faith, is the condition of entrance. We know that faith makes righteous, because it opens the heart to receive God's gift of righteousness; but that effect of faith is implied rather than stated here, where security and peace are the main ideas. As some fugitives from the storm of war sit in security behind the battlements of a fortress, and scarcely hear the din of conflict in the open field below, the heart, which has taken refuge by trust in God, is kept in peace so deep that it passes description, and the singer is fain to give a notion of its completeness by calling it 'peace, peace.' The mind which trusts is steadied thereby, as light things lashed to a firm stay are kept steadfast, however the ship toss. The only way to get and keep fixedness of temper and spirit amid change and earthquake is to hold on to God, and then we may be stable with stability derived from the foundations of His throne to which we cling.

Therefore the song breaks into triumphant fervour of summons to all who hear it, to 'trust in Jah Jehovah for ever.' Such settled, perpetual trust is the only

attitude corresponding to His mighty name, and to the realities found in His character. He is the 'Rock of Ages,' the grand figure which Moses learned beneath the cliffs of Sinai and wove into his last song, and which tells us of the unchanging strength that makes a sure hiding-place for all generations, and the ample space which will hold all the souls of men, and be for a shadow from the heat, a covert from the tempest, a shelter from the foe, and a home for the homeless, with many a springing fountain in its clefts.

The great act of judgment which the song celebrates is now (vs. 5, 6) brought into contrast with the blessed picture of the city, and by the introductory 'for' is stated as the reason for eternal trust. The language, as it were, leaps and dances in jubilation, heaping together brief emotional and synonymous clauses. So low is the once proud city brought, that the feet of the poor tread it down. These 'poor' and 'needy' are the true Israel, the suffering saints, who had known how cruel the sway of the fallen robber city was; and now they march across its site; and its broken columns and ruined palaces strew the ground below their feet. 'The righteous nation' of the one picture are 'the poor and needy' of the other. No doubt the prophecy has had partial accomplishments more than once or twice, when the oppressed church has triumphed, and some hoary iniquity been levelled at a blow, or toppled over by slow decay. But the complete accomplishment is yet future, and not to be realised till that last act, when all antagonism shall be ended, and the net result of the weary history of the world be found to be just these two pictures of Isaiah's—the strong city of God with its happy inhabitants, and the everlasting desolations of the fallen city of confusion.

The triumphant hurry of the song pauses for a moment to gaze upon the crash, and in verse 7 gathers its lessons into a kind of proverbial saying, which is perhaps best translated 'The path of the just is smooth (or "plain"); Thou levellest smooth the path of the just.' To render 'upright' instead of 'smooth' seems to make the statement almost an identical proposition, and is tame. What is meant is, that, in the light of the end, the path which often seemed rough is vindicated. The judgment has showed that the righteous man's course had no unnecessary difficulties. The goal explains the road. The good man's path is smooth, not because of its own nature, but because God makes it so. We are to look for the clearing of our road, not to ourselves, nor to circumstances, but to Him; and even when it is engineered through rocks and roughnesses, to believe that He will make the rough places plain, or give us shoes of iron and brass to encounter them. Trust that when the journey is over the road will be explained, and that this reflection, which breaks the current of the swift song of the prophet, will be the abiding, happy conviction of heaven.

Lastly, the song looks back and tells how the poor and needy, in whose name the prophet speaks, had filled the dreary past, while the tyranny of the fallen city lasted, with yearning for the judgment which has now come at last. Verses 8 and 9 breathe the very spirit of patient longing and meek hope. There is a certain tone of triumph in that 'Yea,' as if the singer would point to the great judgment now accomplished, as vindicating the long, weary hours of hope deferred. That for which 'the poor and needy' wait is the coming 'in the path of Thy judgments.' The attitude of expectance is as much the duty and support of Christians

as of Israel. We have a greater future clearer before us than they had. The world needs God's coming in judgment more than ever; and it says little for either the love to God or the benevolence towards man of average Christians, that they should know so little of that yearning of soul which breathes through so much of the Old Testament. For the glory of God and the good of men, we should have the desire of our souls turned to His manifestation of Himself in His righteous judgments. It was no personal end which bred the prophet's yearning. True, the 'night' round him was dreary enough, and sorrow lay black on his people and himself; but it was God's 'name' and 'memorial' that was uppermost in his desires. That is to say, the chief object of the devout soul's longings should be the glory of God's revealed character. And the deepest reason for wishing that He would flash forth from His hiding-place in judgments, is because such an apocalypse is the only way by which wilfully blind eyes can be made to see, and wilfully unrighteous hearts can be made to practise righteousness.

Isaiah believed in the wholesome effect of terror. His confidence in the power of judgments to teach the obstinate corresponds to the Old Testament point of view, and contains a truth for all points of view; but it is not the whole truth. We know only too well that sorrows and judgments do not work infallibly, and that men 'being often reprov'd, harden their necks.' We know, too, more clearly than any prophet of old could know, that the last arrow in God's quiver is not some unheard-of awfulness of judgment, but an unspeakable gift of love, and that if that 'favour shown to the wicked' in the life and death of God's Son does not lead him to 'learn righteousness,' nothing else will.



But while this is true, the prophet's aspirations are founded on the facts of human nature too, and judgments do sometimes startle those whom kindness had failed to touch. It is an awful thought that human nature may so steel itself against the whole armoury of divine weapons as that favour and severity are equally blunted, and the heart remains unpierced by either. It is an awful thought that there may be induced such truculent obstinacy of love of evil that, even when in 'a land of uprightness,' a man shall choose evil, and forcibly shut his eyes, that he may not see the majesty of the Lord, which he does not wish to see because it condemns his choice, and threatens to burn up him and his work together. A blasted tree when all the woods are green, a fleece dry when all around is rejoicing in the dew, a window dark when the whole city is illuminated, one black sheep amid the white flock, or anything else anomalous and alone in its evil, is less tragic than the sight, so common, of a man so sold to sin that the presence of good only makes him angry and restless. It is possible to dwell amidst the full light of Christian truth, and in a society moulded by its precepts, and to be unblessed, unsoftened thereby. If not softened, then hardened; and the wicked who in the land of uprightness deals wrongfully is all the worse for the light which he hated because it showed him the sinfulness of the sin which he obstinately loved and would keep.

## OUR STRONG CITY

'In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will *God* appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.'—ISAIAH xxvi. 1-2.

WHAT day is 'that day'? The answer carries us back a couple of chapters, to the great picture drawn by the prophet of a world-wide judgment, which is followed by a burst of song from the ransomed people of Jehovah, like Miriam's chant by the shores of the Red Sea. The 'city of confusion,' the centre of the power hostile to God and man, falls; and its fall is welcomed by a chorus of praises. The words of my text are the beginning of one of these songs. Whether or not there were any historical event which floated before the prophet's mind is wholly uncertain. If there were a smaller judgment upon some city of the enemy, it passes in his view into a world-wide judgment; and my text is purely ideal, imaginative, and apocalyptic. Its nearest ally is the similar vision of the Book of the Revelation, where, when Babylon sank with a splash like a millstone in the stream, the ransomed people raised their praises.

So, then, whatever may have been the immediate horizon of the prophet, and though there may have stood on it some historical event, the city which he sees falling is other than any material Babylon, and the strong city in which he rejoices is other than the material Jerusalem, though it may have suggested the metaphor of my text. The song fits our lips quite as closely as it did the lips from which it first sprang, thrilling with triumph: 'We have a strong city; salvation will *God* appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open

ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.'

There are three things, then, here: the city, its defences, its citizens.

### I. The City.

Now, no doubt the prophet was thinking of the literal Jerusalem; but the city is ideal, as is shown by the bulwarks which defend, and by the qualifications which permit entrance. And so we must pass beyond the literalities of Palestine, and, as I think, must not apply the symbol to any visible institution or organisation if we are to come to the depth and greatness of the meaning of these words. No church which is organised amongst men can be the New Testament representation of this strong city. And if the explanation is to be looked for in that direction at all, it can only be the invisible aggregate of ransomed souls which is regarded as being the Zion of the prophecy.

But perhaps even that is too definite and hard. And we are rather to think of the unseen but existent order of things or polity to which men here on earth may belong, and which will one day, after shocks and convulsions that shatter all which is merely institutional and human, be manifested still more gloriously.

The central thought that was moving in the prophet's mind is that of the indestructible vitality of the true Israel, and the order which it represented, of which Jerusalem on its rock was but to him a symbol. And thus for us the lesson is that, apart altogether from the existing and visible order of things in which we dwell, there is a polity to which we may belong, for 'ye are come unto Mount Zion, the city of the living

God,' and that that order is indestructible. Convulsions come, every Babylon falls, all human institutions change and pass. 'The kingdoms old' are 'cast into another mould.' But persistent through them all, and at the last, high above them all, will stand the stable polity of Heaven, '*the city which hath the foundations.*'

*There* is a lesson for us, brethren, in times of fluctuation, of change of opinion, of shaking of institutions, and of new social, economical, and political questions, threatening day by day to reorganise society. 'We have a strong city'; and whatever may come—and much destructive will come, and much that is venerable and antique, rooted in men's prejudices, and having survived through and oppressed the centuries, will have to go; but God's polity, His form of human society of which the perfect ideal and antitype, so to speak, lies concealed in the heavens, is everlasting. Therefore, whatsoever changes, whatsoever ancient and venerable things come to be regarded as of no account, howsoever the nations, like clay in the hands of the potter, may have to assume new forms, as certainly they will, yet the foundation of God standeth sure. And for Christian men in revolutionary epochs, whether these revolutions affect the forms in which truth is grasped, or whether they affect the moulds into which society is run, the only worthy temper is the calm, triumphant expectation that through all the dust, contradiction, and distraction, the fair city of God will be brought nearer and made more manifest to man. Isaiah, or whoever was the writer of these great words of my text, stayed his own and his people's hearts in a time of confusion and distress, by the thought that it was only Babylon that

could fall, and that Jerusalem was the possessor of a charmed, immortal life.

This strong city, the order of human society which God has appointed, and which exists, though it be hidden in the heavens, will be manifested one day when, like the fair vision of the goddess rising from amidst the ocean's foam, and shedding peace and beauty over the charmed waves, there will emerge from all the wild confusion and tossing billows of the sea of the peoples the fair form of the 'Bride, the Lamb's wife.' There shall be an apocalypse of the city, and whether the old words which catch up the spirit of my text, and speak of that Holy City as 'descending from heaven' upon earth, at the close of the history of the world, are to be taken, as perhaps they are, as expressive of the truth that a renewed earth is to be the dwelling of the ransomed or no, this at least is clear, that the city shall be revealed, and when Babylon is swept away, Zion shall stand.

To this city—existent, immortal, and waiting to be revealed—you and I may belong to-day. 'We *have* a strong city.' You may lay hold of life either by the side of it which is transient and trivial and contemptible, or by the side of it which goes down through all the mutable and is rooted in eternity. As in some seaweed, far out in the depths of the ocean, the tiny frond that floats upon the billow goes down and down and down, by filaments that bind it to the basal rock, so the most insignificant act of our fleeting days has a hold upon eternity, and life in all its moments may be knit to the permanent. We may unite our lives with the surface of time or with the centre of eternity. Though we dwell in tabernacles, we may still be 'come to Mount Zion,' and all life be

awful, noble, solemn, religious, because it is all connected with the unseen city across the seas. It is for us to determine to which of these orders—the perishable, noisy and intrusive and persistent in its appeals, or the calm, silent, most real, eternal order beyond the stars—our petty lives shall attach themselves.

II. Now note, secondly, the defences.

‘Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.’ This ‘evangelical prophet,’ as he has been called, is distinguished, not only by the clearness of his anticipations of Jesus Christ and His work, but by the fulness and depth which he attaches to that word ‘salvation.’ He all but anticipates the New Testament completeness and fulness of meaning, and lifts it from all merely material associations of earthly or transitory deliverance, into the sphere in which we are accustomed to regard it as especially moving. By ‘salvation’ he means and we mean, not only negative but positive blessings. Negatively it includes the removal of every conceivable or endurable evil, ‘all the ills that flesh is heir to,’ whether they be evils of sin or evils of sorrow; and, positively, the investiture with every possible good that humanity is capable of, whether it be good of goodness, or good of happiness. This is what the prophet tells us is the wall and bulwark of his ideal-real city.

Mark the eloquent omission of the name of the builder of the wall. ‘God’ is a supplement. Salvation ‘will *He* appoint for walls and bulwarks.’ No need to say who it is that flings such a fortification around the city. There is only one hand that can trace the lines of such walls; only one hand that can pile their stones; only one that can lay them, as the walls of Jericho were laid, in the blood of His first-

born Son. 'Salvation will He appoint for walls and bulwarks.' That is to say in a highly imaginative and picturesque form, that the defence of the city is God Himself; and it is substantially a parallel with other words which speak about Him as being 'a wall of fire round about it, and the glory in the midst of it.' The fact of salvation is the wall and the bulwark. And the consciousness of the fact, and the sense of possessing it, is for our poor hearts one of our best defences against both the evil of sin and the evil of sorrow. For nothing so robs temptation of its power, and so lightens the pressure of calamities, and draws the poison from the fangs of sin and sorrow, as the assurance that the loving purpose of God to save grasps and keeps us. They who shelter behind that wall, and feel that between them and sin, and them and sorrow, there rises the inexpugnable defence of an Almighty purpose and power to save, lie safe whatever betides. There is no need of other defences. Zion

'Needs no bulwarks,  
No towers along the steep.'

God Himself is the shield, and none other is required.

So, brethren, let us walk by the faith that is always confident, though it depends on an unseen hand. It is a grand thing to be able to stand, as it were, in the open, a mark for all 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,' and yet to feel that around us there are walls most real, though invisible, which permit no harm to come to us. Our feeble sense-bound souls much prefer a visible wall. We like a handrail on the stair. Though it does not at all guard the descent, it keeps our heads from getting dizzy. It is hard for us, as some travellers may have to do, to walk with

steady foot and unthrobbing heart along a narrow ledge of rock with beetling precipice above us and black depths beneath, and we would like a little bit of a wall of some sort, for imagination if not for reality, between us and the sheer descent. But it is blessed to learn that naked we are clothed, solitary we have a Companion, and unarmed we have our defenceless heads covered with the shadow of the great wing, which, though sense sees it not, faith knows is there. A servant of God is never without a friend, and when most unsheltered

‘From marge to blue marge  
The whole sky grows his targe,  
With sun’s self for visible boss,’

beneath which he lies safe.

‘Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks,’ and if we realise, as we ought to do, His purpose to keep us safe, and His power to keep us safe, and the actual operation of His hand keeping us safe at every moment, we shall not ask that these defences shall be supplemented by the poor feeble earthworks that sense can throw up.

III. Lastly, note the citizens.

Our text is part of a ‘song,’ and is not to be interpreted in the cold-blooded fashion that might suit prose. A voice, coming from whom we know not, breaks in upon the first strain with a command, addressed to whom we know not—‘Open ye the gates’—the city thus far being supposed to be empty—‘that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.’ The central idea there is just this, ‘Thy people shall be all righteous.’ The one qualification for entrance into the city is absolute purity.



Now, brethren, that is true in regard to our present imperfect denizenship within the city; and it is true in regard to men's passing into it in its perfect and final form. As to the former, there is nothing that you Christian people need more to have dinned into you than this, that your continuance in the state of a redeemed man, with all the security and blessing that attach thereto, depends upon your continuing to be righteous. Every sin, every flaw, every dropping beneath our own standard in conscience of what we ought to be, has for its inevitable result that we are robbed for the time being of consciousness of the walls of the city being about us and of our being citizens thereof. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in His holy place?' The New Testament, as emphatically as the old psalm, answers, 'He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.' 'Let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous.' There is no way by which Christian men here on earth can pass into and keep within the city of the living God, except they possess personal purity, righteousness of life, and cleanness of heart.

They used to say that Venice glass was so made that any poison poured into it shivered the vessel. Any drop of sin poured into your cup of communion with God, shatters the cup and spills the wine. Whosoever thinks himself a citizen of that great city, if he falls into transgression, and soils the cleanness of his hands, and ruffles the calm of his pure heart by self-willed sinfulness, will wake to find himself not within the battlements, but lying wounded, robbed, solitary, in the pitiless desert. My brother, it is 'the righteous nation' that 'enters in,' even here on earth.

I do not need to remind you how, admittedly by us

all, that is the case in regard to the final form of the city of our God, into which nothing shall enter 'that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination or maketh a lie.' Heaven can only be entered into hereafter by, as here and now it can only enter into, those who are pure of heart. All else there would shrivel as foul things born in the darkness do in the light, and be consumed in the fire. None but the pure can enter and see God.

'The nation which keepeth the truth'—that does not mean adherence to any revelation, or true creed, or the like. The word which is employed means, not truth of thought, but truth of character; and might, perhaps, be better represented by the more familiar word in such a connection, 'faithfulness.' A man who is true to God, keeping up a faithful relation to Him who is faithful to us, he, and only he, will pass into, and abide in, the city.

Now, brethren, so far our text carries us, but no further; unless, perhaps, there may be a hint of something yet deeper in the next clause of this song. If any one asks, How does the nation become righteous? the answer may lie in the immediately following exhortation—'Trust ye in the Lord for ever.' But whether that be so or not, if we want an answer to the questions, How can my stained feet be cleansed so as to be fit to tread the crystal pavements? how can my foul garments be so purged as not to be a blot and an eyesore, beside the white, lustrous robes that sweep along them and gather no defilement there? the only answer that I know of is to be found by turning to the final visions of the New Testament, where the spirit of this whole section of our prophet is reproduced. Again, Babylon falls amidst the songs of saints; and

then, down upon all the dust and confusion of the crash of ruin, the seer beholds the Lamb's wife, the new Jerusalem, descending from above. To his happy eyes its glories are unveiled, its golden streets, its open gates, its walls of precious stones, its flashing river, its peaceful inhabitants, its light streaming from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And when that vision passes, his last message to us is, 'Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may enter through the gates into the city.' None but those who wash their garments, and make them white in the blood of the Lamb, can, living, come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; or, dying, can pass through the iron gate that opens to them of its own accord, and find themselves as day breaks in the street of the Jerusalem which is above.

### THE INHABITANT OF THE ROCK

'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in Thee. Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength.'—ISAIAH xxvi. 3-4.

THERE is an obvious parallel between these verses and the two preceding ones. The safety which was there set forth as the result of dwelling in the strong city is here presented as the consequence of trust. The emblem of the fortified place passes into that of the Rock of Ages. There is the further resemblance in form, that, just as in the two preceding verses we had the triumphant declaration of security followed by a summons to some unknown persons to 'open the gates,' so here we have the triumphant declaration of perfect peace, followed by a summons to all to 'trust

in the Lord for ever.' If we may suppose the invocation of the preceding verses to be addressed to the watchers at the gate of the strong city, it is perhaps not too fanciful to suppose that the invitation in my text is the watcher's answer, pointing the way by which men may pass into the city.

Whether that be so or no, at all events I take it as by no means accidental that, immediately upon the statement of the Old Testament law that righteousness alone admits to the presence of God, there follows so clear and emphatic an anticipation of the great New Testament Gospel that faith is the condition of righteousness, and that immediately after hearing that only 'the righteous nation which keepeth the truth' can enter there, we hear the merciful call, 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever.' So, then, I think we have in the words before us, though not formally yet really, very large teaching as to the nature, the object, the blessed effects, and the universal duty of that trust in the Lord which makes the very nexus between man and God, according to the teaching of the New Testament.

I. First, then, I desire to notice in a sentence the insight into the true nature of trust or faith given by the word employed here.

Now the literal meaning of the expression here rendered 'to trust' is to lean upon anything. As we say, trust is reliance. As a weak man might stay his faltering, tottering steps upon some strong staff, or might lean upon the outstretched arm of a friend, so we, conscious of our weakness, aware of our faltering feet, and realising the roughness of the road, and the smallness of our strength, may lay the whole weight of ourselves upon the loving strength of Jehovah.

And that is the trust of the Old Testament, the faith of the New—the simple act of reliance, going out of myself to find the basis of my being, forsaking myself to touch and rest upon the ground of my security, passing from my own weakness and laying my trembling hand into the strong hand of God, like some weak-handed youth on a coach-box who turns to a stronger beside him and says: ‘Take thou the reins, for I am feeble to direct or to restrain.’ Trust is reliance, and reliance is always blessedness.

II. Notice, secondly, the steadfast peacefulness of trust.

Now there are difficulties about the rendering and precise significance of the first verse of my text with which I do not need to trouble you. The Authorised Version, and still more perhaps the Revised Version, give substantially, as I take it, the prophet’s meaning; and the margin of the Revised Version is still more literal and accurate than the text, ‘A steadfast mind Thou keepest in perfect peace, because it trusteth in Thee.’ If this, then, be the true meaning of the words, you observe that it is the steadfast mind, steadfast because it trusts, which God keeps in the deep peace that is expressed by the reduplication of the word.

And if we break up that complex thought into its elements, it just comes to this, first, that trust makes steadfastness. Most men’s lives are blown about by winds of circumstance, directed by gusts of passion, shaped by accidents, and are fragmentary and jerky, like some ship at sea with nobody at the helm, heading here and there, as the force of the wind or the flow of the current may carry them. If my life is to be steadied, there must not only be a strong hand at the tiller, but some outward object which shall be for me

the point of aim and the point of rest. No man can steady his life except by clinging to a holdfast without himself. Some of us look for that stay in the fluctuations and fleetingnesses of creatures; and some of us are wiser and saner, and look for it in the steadfastness of the unchanging God. The men who do the former are the sport of circumstances, and the slaves of their own natures, and there is no consistency in noble aim and effort throughout their lives, corresponding to their circumstances, relations, and nature. Only they who stay themselves upon God, and get down through all the superficial shifting strata of drift and gravel, to the base-rock, are steadfast and solid.

My brother, if you desire to govern yourself, you must let God govern you. If you desire to be firm, you must draw your firmness from the unchangingness of that divine nature which you grasp. How can a willow be stiffened into an iron pillar? Only—if I might use such a violent metaphor—when it receives into its substance the iron particles that it draws from the soil in which it is rooted. How can a bit of thistle-down be kept motionless amidst the tempest? Only by being glued to something that is fixed. What do men do with light things on deck when the ship is pitching? Lash them to a fixed point. Lash yourselves to God by simple trust, and then you will partake of His serene immutability in such fashion as it is possible for the creature to participate in the attributes of the Creator.

And then, still further, the steadfast mind—steadfast because it trusts—is rewarded in that it is kept by God. It is no mere mistake in the order of his thought which leads this prophet to allege that it is

the steadfast mind which God keeps. For, though it is true, on the one hand, that the real fixity and solidity of a human character come more surely and fully through trust in God than by any other means, on the other hand it is true that, in order to receive the full blessed effects of trust into our characters and lives, we must persistently and doggedly keep on in the attitude of confidence. If a man holds out to God a tremulous hand with a shaking cup in it, which he sometimes presents and sometimes twitches back, it is not to be expected that God will pour the treasure of His grace into such a vessel, with the risk of most of it being spilt upon the ground. There must be a steadfast waiting if there is to be a continual flow.

It is the mind that cleaves to God which God keeps. I suppose that there was floating before Paul's thoughts some remembrance of this great passage of the evangelical prophet when he uttered his words, which ring so strikingly with so many echoes of them, when he said, 'The peace of God which passeth understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' It is the steadfast mind that is kept in perfect peace. If we 'keep ourselves,' by that divine help which is always waiting to be given, 'in the' faith and 'love of God,' He will keep us in the hour of temptation, will keep us from falling, and will garrison our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And then, still further, this faithful, steadfast heart and mind, kept by God, is a mind filled with deepest peace. There is something very beautiful in the prophet's abandoning the attempt to find any adjective of quality which adequately characterises the peace of which he has been speaking. He falls back upon the expedient which is the confession of the

impotence of human speech worthily to portray its subject when he simply says, 'Thou shalt keep in peace, peace . . . because he trusteth in Thee.' The reduplication expresses the depth, the completeness of the tranquillity which flows into the heart. Such continuity, wave after wave, or rather ripple after ripple, is possible even for us. For, dear brethren, the possession of this deep, unbroken peace does not depend on the absence of conflict, on distraction, trouble, or sorrow, but on the presence of God. If we are in touch with Him, then our troubled days may be calm, and beneath all the surface tumult there may be a centre of rest. The garrison in some high hill-fortress looks down upon the open where the enemy's ranks are crawling like insects across the grass, and scarcely hears the noise of the tumult, and no arrow can reach the lofty hold. So, up in God we may dwell at rest whate'er betide. Strange that we should prefer to live down amongst the unwalled villages, which every spoiler can harry and burn, when we might climb, and by the might and the magic of trust in the Lord bring round about ourselves a wall of fire which shall consume the poison out of the evil, even whilst it permits the sorrow to do its beneficent work upon us!

III. Note again the worthiness of the divine Name to evoke, and the power of the divine character to reward, the trust.

We pass to the last words of my text:—'In the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength.'

Now I suppose we all know that the words feebly rendered in the Authorised Version 'everlasting strength' are literally 'the Rock of Ages'; and that this verse is the source of that hallowed figure which,



by one of the greatest of our English hymns, is made familiar and immortal to all English-speaking people.

But there is another peculiarity about the words on which I dwell for a moment, and that is, that here we have, for one of the only two times in which the expression occurs in Scripture, the great name of Jehovah reduplicated. 'In Jah Jehovah is the Rock of Ages.' In the former verse the prophet had given up in despair the attempt to characterise the peace which God gave, and fallen back upon the expedient of naming it twice over. In this verse, with similar eloquence of reticence, he abandons the attempt to describe or characterise that great Name, and in adoration, contents himself with twice taking it upon his lips, in order to *impress* what he cannot *express*, the majesty and the sufficiency of that name.

What, then, is the force of that name? We do not need, I suppose, to do more than simply remind you that there are two great thoughts communicated by that self-revelation of God which lies in it. *Jehovah*, in its literal grammatical signification, puts emphasis upon the absolute, underived, and therefore unlimited, unconditioned, unchangeable, eternal being of God. 'I AM THAT I AM.' Men and creatures are what they are made, are what they become, and some time or other cease to be what they were. But God is what He is, and is because He is. He is the Source, the Motive, the Law, the Sustenance of His own Being; and changeless and eternal He is for ever. In that name is the Rock of Ages.

That mighty name, by its place in the history of Revelation, conveys to us still further thoughts, for it is the name of the God who entered into covenant with His ancient people, and remains bound by His

covenant to bless us. That is to say, He hath not left us in darkness as to the methods and purpose of His dealings with us, or as to the attitude of His heart towards us. He has bound Himself by solemn words, and by deeds as revealing as words. So we can reckon on God. To use a vulgarism which is stripped of its vulgarity if employed reverently, as I would do it—we know where to have Him. He has given us the elements to calculate His orbit; and we are sure that the calculation will come right. So, because the name flashes upon men the thought of an absolute Being, eternal, and all-sufficient, and self-modified, and changeless, and because it reveals to us the very inmost heart of the mystery, and makes it possible for us to forecast the movements of this great Sun of our heavens, therefore in the name '*Jah Jehovah* is the Rock of Ages.'

The metaphor needs no expansion. We understand that it conveys the idea of unchangeable defence. As the cliffs tower above the river that swirls at their base, and takes centuries to eat the faintest line upon their shining surface, so the changeless God rises above the stream of time, of which the brief breakers are human lives, 'sparkling, bursting, borne away.' They who fasten themselves to that Rock are safe in its unchangeable strength. God the Unchangeable is the amulet against any change, that is not growth, in the lives of those who trust Him. Some of us may recall some great precipice rising above the foliage, which stands to-day as it did when we were boys, unwasted in its silent strength, while generations of leaves have opened and withered at its base, and we have passed from childhood to age. Thus, unaffected by the transiency that changes all beneath,

God rises, the Rock of Ages in whom we may trust. 'The conies are a feeble folk, but they make their houses in the rocks.' So our weakness may house itself there and be at rest.

IV. Lastly, note the summons to trust.

We know not whose voice it is that is heard in the last words of my text, but we know to whose ears it is addressed. It is to all. 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever.'

Surely, surely the blessed effects of trust, of which we have been speaking, have a voice of merciful invitation summoning us to exercise it. The promise of peace appeals to the deepest, though often neglected and misunderstood, longings of the human heart. 'Inly we sigh for that repose.' O dear brethren, if it is true that into our agitated and struggling lives there may steal, and in them there may abide, this priceless blessing of a great tranquillity, surely nothing else should be needed to woo us to accept the conditions and put forth the trust. It is strange that we should turn away, as we are all tempted to do, from that rest in God, and try to find repose in what was only meant for stimulus, and is altogether incapable of imparting rest. Storms live in the lower regions of the atmosphere; get up higher and there is peace. Waves dash and break on the surface region of the ocean; get down deeper, nearer the heart of things, and again there is peace.

Surely the name of the Rock of Ages is an invitation to us to put our trust in Him. If a man knew God as He is, he could not choose but trust Him. It is because we have blackened His face with our own doubts, and darkened His character with the mists that rise from our own sinful hearts, that we have made that

bright Sun in the heavens, which ought to fall upon our hearts with healing in its beams, into a lurid ball of fire that shines threatening through the dim obscurity of our misty hearts. But if we knew Him we should love Him, and if we would only listen to His own self-revelation, we should find that He draws us to Himself by the manifestation of Himself, as the sun binds all the planets to his mass and his flame by the irradiation of his own mystic energies.

The summons is a summons to a faith corresponding to that upon which it is built. 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever, for in the Lord is the strength that endures for ever.' Our continual faith is the only fit response to His unchanging faithfulness. Build rock upon rock.

The summons is a summons addressed to us all. 'Trust ye'—whoever ye are—'in the Lord for ever.' You and I, dear friends, hear the summons in a yet more beseeching and tender voice than was audible to the prophet, for our faith has a nobler object, and may have a mightier operation, seeing that its object is 'the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world'; and its operation, to bring to us peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. When from the Cross there comes to all our hearts the merciful invitation, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,' why should not we each answer,

'Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee'?

## THE GRASP THAT BRINGS PEACE

‘Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; yea, let him make peace with Me.’—ISAIAH xxvii. 5.

LYRICAL emotion makes the prophet’s language obscure by reason of its swift transitions from one mood of feeling to another. But the main drift here is discernible. God is guarding Israel, His vineyard, and before Him its foes are weak as ‘thorns and briers,’ whose end is to be burned. With daring anthropomorphism, the prophet puts into God’s mouth a longing for the enemies to measure their strength against His, a warrior’s eagerness for the fight. But at once this martial tone gives place to the tender invitation of the text, and the infinite divine willingness to be reconciled to the enemy speaks wooingly and offers conditions of peace. All this has universal application to our relations to God.

### I. The Hostility.

That our relations with God are ‘strained,’ and that men are ‘enemies of God,’ is often repelled as exaggeration, if not as directly false. And, no doubt, the Scripture representation has often been so handled as to become caricature rather than portraiture. Scripture does not deny the lingering presence in men of goodness, partial and defective, nor does it assert that conscious antagonism to God is active in godless men. But it does assert that ‘God is not in all their thoughts,’ and that their wills are ‘not subject to the law of God.’ And in such a case as man’s relations to God, indifference and forgetfulness cannot but rest upon divergence of will and contrast of character. Why do men ‘not like to retain God in their know-

ledge,' but because they feel that the thought of Him would spoil the feast, like the skeleton in the banquet-chamber? Beneath the apparent indifference lie opposition of will, meeting God's 'Thou shalt' with man's 'I will not'; opposition of moral nature, impurity shrinking from perfect purity; opposition of affection, the warmth of human love being diverted to other objects than God.

II. The entreating Love that is not turned aside by hostility.

The antagonism is wholly on man's part.

True, man's opposition necessarily turns certain sides of the divine character to present a hostile front to him. Not only God's physical attributes, if we may so call them, but the moral attributes which guide the energies of these, namely, His holiness and His righteousness, and the acts of His sovereignty which flow from these, must be in opposition to the man who has set himself in opposition to God. 'The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.' If it were not, He would not be God.

But still, God's love enfolds all men in its close and tender clasp. As the context says, in close connection with the threat to burn the briers and thorns, 'Fury is not in Me.' Man's hostility does not rouse God's. He wars against the sin because He still loves the sinner. His love 'must come with a rod,' but, at the same time, it comes 'with the spirit of meekness.' It gives its enemy all that it can; but it cannot give all that it would.

He stoops to sue for our amity. It is the creditor who exhausts beseechings on His debtor, so much does He wish to 'agree with His adversary quickly.' The tender pleading of the Apostle was but a faint echo of

the marvellous condescension of God, when he, 'in God's stead, besought: 'Be ye reconciled to God.'

### III. The grasp which ends alienation.

The word for 'strength' here means a stronghold or fortified place, which serves as an asylum or refuge. There may be some mingling of an allusion to the fugitive's taking hold of the horns of the altar, and so being safe from the vengeance of his pursuers. If we may take this double metaphor as implied in the text, it vividly illustrates the essence of the faith which brings us into peace with God. That faith is the flight of the soul to God, and, in another aspect, it is the clinging of the soul to Him. How much more these two metaphors tell of the real nature of faith than many a theological treatise! They speak of the urgency of the peril from which it seeks deliverance. A fugitive with the hot breath of the avenger of blood panting behind him, and almost feeling the spear-point in his back, would not let the grass grow under his feet. They speak of the energetic clutch of faith, as that of the man gripping the horns of the altar. They suggest that faith is something much more vital than intellectual assent or credence, namely, an act of the whole man realising his need and casting himself on God.

And they set in clear light what is the connection between faith and salvation. It is not the hand that grasps the altar that secures safety, but the altar itself. It is not the flight to the fortress, but the massive walls themselves, which keeps those who hunt after the fugitive at bay. It is not my faith, but the God on whom my faith fastens, that brings peace to my conscience.

### IV. The peace that this grasp brings.

In Christ God has 'put away all His wrath, and

turned Himself from the fierceness of His anger.' And He was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. It is a one-sided warfare that men wage with Him, and when we abandon our opposition to Him, the war is ended. We might say that God, clasped by faith and trusted in and loved, is the asylum from God opposed and feared. His moral nature must be against evil, but faith unites us to Jesus, and, by union with Him, we receive the germ of a nature which has no affinity with evil, and which God wholly delights in and loves. To those who live by the life, and growingly bear the image of His Son, the divine Nature turns a face all bright and favouring, and His moral and physical attributes are all enlisted on their side. The fortress looks grim to outsiders gazing up at its strong walls and frowning battlements, but to dwellers within, these give security, and in its inmost centre is a garden, with flowers and a springing fountain, whither the noise of fighting never penetrates. We have but to cease to be against Him, and to grasp the facts of His love as revealed in the Cross of Christ, the sacrifice who taketh away the sin of the world, and we are at peace with God. Being at peace with Him, the discords of our natures warring against themselves are attuned into harmony, and we are at peace within. And when God and we are at one, and we are at one with ourselves, then all things will be on our side, and will work together for good. To such a man the ancient promise will be fulfilled: 'Thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.'



## THE JUDGMENT OF DRUNKARDS AND MOCKERS

‘Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine! 2. Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one, which, as a tempest of hail, and a destroying storm, as a flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with the hand. 3. The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet: 4. And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up. 5. In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of His people, 6. And for a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate. 7. But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way: the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. 8. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean. 9. Whom shall He teach knowledge? and whom shall He make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. 10. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: 11. For with stammering lips, and another tongue, will He speak to this people. 12. To whom He said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. 13. But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.’—ISAIAH xxviii. 1-13.

THIS prophecy probably falls in the first years of Hezekiah, when Samaria still stood, and the storm of war was gathering black in the north. The portion included in the text predicts the fall of Samaria (verses 1-6) and then turns to Judah, which is guilty of the same sins as the northern capital, and adds to them mockery of the prophet’s message. Isaiah speaks with fiery indignation and sharp sarcasm. His words are aflame with loathing of the moral corruption of both kingdoms, and he fastens on the one common vice of drunkenness—not as if it were the only sin, but because it shows in the grossest form the rottenness underlying the apparent beauty.

I. The woe on Samaria (verses 1-6). Travellers are unanimous in their raptures over the fertility and

beauty of the valley in which Samaria stood, perched on its sunny, fruitful hill, amid its vineyards. The situation of the city naturally suggests the figure which regards it as a sparkling coronet or flowery wreath, twined round the brows of the hill; and that poetical metaphor is the more natural, since revellers were wont to twist garlands in their hair, when they reclined at their orgies. The city is 'the crown of pride'—that is, the object of boasting and foolish confidence—and is also 'the fading flower of his sparkling ornament'; that is, the flower which is the ornament of Ephraim, but is destined to fade.

The picture of the city passes into that of the drunken debauch, where the chief men of Samaria sprawl, 'smitten down' by wine, and with the innocent flowers on their hot temples drooping in the fumes of the feast. But bright and sunny as the valley is, glittering in the light as the city sits on her hill, careless and confident as the revellers are, a black cloud lies on the horizon, and one of the terrible sudden storms which such lands know comes driving up the valley. 'The Lord hath a mighty and strong one'—the conqueror from the north, who is God's instrument, though he knows it not.

The swift, sudden, irresistible onslaught of the Assyrian is described, in harmony with the figure of the flowery coronal, as a tempest which beats down the flowers and flings the sodden crown to the ground. The word rendered 'tempest' is graphic, meaning literally a 'downpour.' First comes hail, which batters the flowers to shreds; then the effect of the storm is described as 'destruction,' and then the hurrying words turn back to paint the downpour of rain, 'mighty' from its force in falling, and 'overflowing' from its

abundance, which soon sets all the fields swimming with flood water. What chance has a poor twist of flowers in such a storm? Its beauty will be marred, and all the petals beaten off, and nothing remains but that it should be trampled into mud. The rush of the prophet's denunciation is swift and irresistible as the assault it describes, and it flashes from one metaphor to another without pause. The fertility of the valley of Samaria shapes the figures. As the picture of the flowery chaplet, so that which follows of the early fig, is full of local colour. A fig in June is a delicacy, which is sure to be plucked and eaten as soon as seen. Such a dainty, desirable morsel will Samaria be, as sweet and as little satisfying to the all-devouring hunger of the Assyrian.

But storms sweep the air clear, and everything will not go down before this one. The flower fadeth, but there is a chaplet of beauty which men may wreath round their heads, which shall bloom for ever. All sensuous enjoyment has its limits in time, as well as in nobleness and exquisiteness; but when it is all done with, the beauty and festal ornament which truly crowns humanity shall smell sweet and blossom. The prophecy had regard simply to the issue of the historical disaster to which it pointed, and it meant that, after the storm of Assyrian conquest, there would still be, for the servants of God, the residue of the people, both in Israel and in Judah, a fuller possession of the blessings which descend on the men who make God their portion. But the principle involved is for ever true. The sweeping away of the perishable does draw true hearts nearer to God.

So the two halves of this prophecy give us eternal truths as to the certain destruction awaiting the

joys of sense, and the permanence of the beauty and strength which belong to those who take God for their portion.

Drunkenness seems to have been a national sin in Israel; for Micah rebukes it as vehemently as Isaiah, and it is a clear bit of Christian duty in England to-day to 'set the trumpet to thy mouth and show the people' this sin. But the lessons of the prophecy are wider than the specific form of evil denounced. All setting of affection and seeking of satisfaction in that which, in all the pride of its beauty, is 'a fading flower,' is madness and sin. Into every life thus turned to the perishable will come the crash of the destroying storm, the mutterings of which might reach the ears of the feasters, if they were not drunk with the fumes of their deceiving delights. Only one kind of life has its roots in that which abides, and is safe from tempest and change. Amaranthine flowers bloom only in heaven, and must be brought thence, if they are to garland earthly foreheads. If we take God for ours, then whatever tempests may howl, and whatever fragile though fragrant joys may be swept away, we shall find in Him all that the world fails to give to its votaries. He is 'a crown of glory' and 'a diadem of beauty.' Our humanity is never so fair as when it is made beautiful by the possession of Him. All that sense vainly seeks in earth, faith finds in God. Not only beauty, but 'a spirit of judgment,' in its narrower sense and in its widest, is breathed into those to whom God is 'the master light of all their seeing'; and, yet more, He is strength to all who have to fight. Thus the close union of trustful souls with God, the actual inspiration of these, and the perfecting of their nature from communion with God, are taught us in the great words, which tell how

beauty, justice, and strength are all given in the gift of Jehovah Himself to His people.

II. The prophet turns to Judah (vs. 7-13), and charges them with the same disgusting debauchery. His language is vehement in its loathing, and describes the filthy orgies of those who should have been the guides of the people with almost painful realism. Note how the words 'reel' and 'stagger' are repeated, and also the words 'wine' and 'strong drink.' We see the priests' and prophets' unsteady gait, and then they 'stumble' or fall. There they lie amid the filth, like hogs in a sty. It is very coarse language, but fine words are the Devil's veils for coarse sins; and it is needful sometimes to call spades spades, and not to be ashamed to tell men plainly how ugly are the vices which they are not ashamed to commit. No doubt some of the drunken priests and false prophets in Jerusalem thought Isaiah extremely vulgar and indelicate, in talking about staggering teachers and tables swimming in 'vomit.' But he had to speak out. So deep was the corruption that the officials were tipsy even when engaged in their official duties, the prophets reeled while they were seeing visions; the judges could not sit upright even when pronouncing judgment.

Verses 9 and 10 are generally taken as a sarcastic quotation of the drunkards' scoffs at the prophet. They might be put in inverted commas. Their meaning is, 'Does he take us grave and reverend seigniors, priests and prophets, to be babies just weaned, that he pesters us with these monotonous petty preachings, fit only for the nursery, which he calls his "message"?' In verse 10, the original for 'precept upon precept,' etc., is a series of short words, which may be taken

as reproducing the 'babbling tones of the drunken mockers.'

The loose livers of all generations talk in the same fashion about the stern morality which rebukes their vice. They call it weak, commonplace, fit for children, and they pretend that they despise it. They are much too enlightened for such antiquated teaching. Old women and children may take it in, but men of the world, who have seen life, and know what is what, are not to be fooled so. 'What will this babbler say?' was asked by the wise men of Athens, who were but repeating the scoffs of the prophets and priests of Jerusalem, and the same jeers are bitter in the mouth of many a profligate man to-day. It is the fate of all strict morality to be accounted childish by the people whom it inconveniently condemns.

In verse 11 and onwards the prophet speaks. He catches up the mockers' words, and retorts them. They have scoffed at his message as if it were stammering speech. They shall hear another kind of stammerers when the fierce invaders' harsh and unintelligible language commands them. The reason why these foreign voices would have authority, was the national disregard of God's voice. 'Ye would not hear' Him when, by His prophet, He spoke gracious invitations to rest, and to give the nation rest, in obedience and trust. Therefore they shall hear the battle-cry of the conqueror, and have to obey orders spoken in a barbarous tongue.

Of course, the language meant is the Assyrian, which, though cognate with Hebrew, is so unlike as to be unintelligible to the people. But is not the threat the statement of a great truth always being fulfilled towards the disobedient? If we will not listen to that

loving Voice which calls us to rest, we shall be forced to listen to the harsh and strident tones of conquering enemies who command us to slavish toil. If we will not be guided by His eye and voice, we shall be governed by whip and bridle. Our choice is either to hearken to the divine call, which is loving and gentle, and invites to deep repose springing from faith, or to have to hear the voice of the taskmasters. The monotony of despised moral and religious teaching shall give place to a more terrible monotony, even that of continuous judgments.

‘The mills of God grind slowly.’ Bit by bit, with gradual steps, with dismal persistence, like the slow drops on the rock, the judgments of God trickle out on the mocking heart. It takes a long time for a child to learn a pageful when he gets his lesson a sentence at a time. So slowly do His chastisements fall on men who have despised the continuous messages of His love. The word of the Lord, which was laughed at when it clothed itself in a prophet’s speech, will be heard in more formidable shape, when it is wrapped in the long-drawn-out miseries of years of bondage. The warning is as needful for us as for these drunken priests and scornful rulers. The principle embodied is true in this day as it was then, and we too have to choose between serving God in gladness, hearkening to the voice of His word, and so finding rest to our souls, and serving the world, the flesh, and the devil, and so experiencing the perpetual dropping of the fiery rain of His judgments.

## A CROWN OF PRIDE OR A CROWN OF GLORY

'The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet : 4. And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the summer ; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up. 5. In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his people.'—ISAIAH xxviii. 3-5.

THE reference is probably to Samaria as a chief city of Israel. The image is suggested by the situation of Samaria, high on a hill-side, crowning the valley, and by the rich vegetation and bright flowers which makes it even now one of the few lovely scenes in Palestine ; and by the luxurious riot and sensual excess that were always characteristic of the northern kingdom.

The destruction of Samaria and of the kingdom, then, is here prophesied—the garland will fade, the hail will batter all its drooping flowerets, and it shall be trodden under foot. Look at that withered wreath that gleamed yesterday on some fair head, to-day flung into the ashpit or kicked about the street. That is a modern rendering of the prophet's imagery. But the reference goes further than merely to the city : the whole state of the nation is expressed by the symbol, as doomed to quick decay, fading in itself, and further smitten down by divine judgments.

There is a contrasted picture, that of 'the residue of the people' to whom there is an amaranthine crown, a festal diadem glorious and beautiful, which can never fade, even God Himself. To them who love Him He is an ornament, and His presence is the consecration of the true joyful feast. They who are crowned by Him are crowned, not for idle revelry, but for



strenuous toil ('sit in judgment') and for brave purpose ('turn the battle to the gate,') and their coronation day is ever the day when earthly garlands are withered, whether it be the crises and convulsions of nations and institutions, or times of personal trial, or 'in the hour of death or in the day of judgment.'

Expanding then these thoughts, we have—

I. All godless joys are but fading chaplets.

Of course the first application of such words is to purely sensuous delights.

Men who seek to make life a mere revel and banquet.

Nothing is so short-lived as gratification of appetite. It is not merely that each act lasts but for a moment, but also that past gratifications leave no sort of solace to the appetite behind them; whereas past acquirements or deeds of goodness are a perpetual joy as well as the foundation of the present. There is something essentially isolated in each act of sensuous delight. No man can by so willing recall the taste of eaten food, nor slake his thirst by remembrance of former draughts, or cool himself by thinking of 'frosty Caucasus.' But each such gratification is done when it is done, and there is an end of its power to gratify.

Further, the power of enjoyment wanes, though the lust for it waxes. Hence each act has less and less power of satisfying.

One sees *blasé* young men of twenty-five. It was a man of under thirty-five who wrote, 'Man delights not me, no, nor woman neither.' It was a used-up *roué* that was represented as saying, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' It was of sensuous 'pleasures' that poor Burns wrote,—

'like the snowfall in the river,  
A moment white,—then melts for ever.'

When a people is given over to such excess, late or soon the fate of Samaria comes upon them. Think of the French Revolution or of the fall of Rome, and learn that the prophet was announcing a law for all nations, in his fiery denunciation, and one which holds good to-day as ever.

But we may generalise more widely. Every godless life is essentially transitory; of course, all life is so in one view. But suppose two men, working side by side at the same occupation, passing through the same circumstances. So far as physical changes go, these men are the same. Both lose much. Both leave behind much. Both cease to be interested in much that was dear to them. Both die at last, and leave it all. Is there any difference? The transitoriness is the same, and the eternal consequences are eternal alike in both; and yet there is a very solemn sense in which the one man's life has utterly perished, and the other's abides. Suppose a man, educated to be a first-rate man of business, dies. Which of his trained faculties will he have scope for in that new order of things? Or a student, or a lawyer, or a statesman?

Oh, it is not our natural mortality that makes these thoughts so awful; but it is the thought that the man who is doing these things is *immortal*. The head which wears the fading wreath will live for ever. 'What will ye do in the end?'

II. Godly life brings unfading joys.

Communion with God yields abiding joys. The law of change remains the same. The law of death remains the same. But the motives which direct and impel the godly man are beyond the reach of change.

The habits which he contracts are for heaven as well

as for earth. The treasures which he amasses will always be his.

His life in its essence and his work are one in all worlds. What a grand continuity, then, knits into one a godly life whether it is lived on earth or in heaven!

Communion with God gives beauty and ornament to the whole character. It brings the true refining and perfecting of the soul. No doubt many Christian men, as we see them, are but poor specimens of this effect of godliness; still, it is an effect produced in proportion to the depth and continuity of their communion. We might dwell on the effect on Will, Affections, Understanding, produced by dwelling in God. It is simple fact that the highest conceivable type of beauty is only reached through communion with God.

Communion with God gives power as well as gladness. The life of abiding with God is also one of strenuous effort and real warfare. In the context it is promised that God will be for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate.

The luxurious life of self-indulgence ends, as all selfish life must do, in the vanishing of delights. The life of joy in God issues, as all true joy does, in power for work and in power for conflict.

‘God doth anoint thee with His odorous oil, to wrestle, not to reign.’

III. There will be a coronation day.

‘In that day,’ the day when ‘the crown of pride shall be trodden under foot,’ the people of God are crowned with the diadem of beauty which is God Himself. That twofold work of that one day suggests—

The double aspect of trials and sorrows.

The double aspect of death.

The double aspect of final Judgment.

‘Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day.’

To be crowned or discrowned ‘in that day’ is the alternative set before each of us. Which of the two do we choose?

### MAN’S CROWN AND GOD’S

‘In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty.’—ISAIAH xxviii. 5.

‘Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord.’—ISAIAH lxii. 3.

CONNECTION of first prophecy—destruction of Samaria. Its situation, crowning the hill with its walls and towers, its fertile ‘fat valley,’ the flagrant immorality and drunkenness of its inhabitants, and its final ruin, are all presented in the highly imaginative picture of its fall as being like the trampling under foot of a garland on a reveller’s head, the roses of which fade and droop amid the fumes of the banqueting hall, and are then flung out on the highway. The contrast presented is very striking and beautiful. When all that gross and tumultuous beauty has faded and died, then God Himself will be a crown of beauty to His people.

The second text comes into remarkable line with this. The verbal resemblance is not quite so strong in the original. The words for *diadem* and *crown* are not the same; the word rendered *glory* in the second text is rendered *beauty* in the first, but the two texts are entirely one in meaning. The same metaphor, then, is used with reference to what God is to the Church and what the Church is to God. He is its crown, it is His.

### I. The Possession of God is the Coronation of Man.

(a) Crowns were worn by guests at feasts. They who possess God sit at a table perpetually spread with all which the soul can wish or want. Contrast the perishable delights of sense and godless life with the calm and immortal joys of communion with God; 'a crown that fadeth not away' beside withered garlands.

(b) Crowns were worn by kings. They who serve God are thereby invested with rule over selves, over circumstances, over all externals. He alone gives completeness to self-control.

(c) Crowns were worn by priests. The highest honour and dignity of man's nature is thereby reached. To have God is like a beam of sunshine on a garden, which brings out the colours of all the flowers; contrast with the same garden in the grey monotony of a cloudy twilight.

### II. The Coronation of Man in God is the Coronation of God in Man.

That includes the following thoughts.

The true glory of God is in the communication of Himself. What a wonderful light that throws on divine character! It is equivalent to 'God is Love.'

He who is glorified by God glorifies God, as showing the most wonderful working of His power in making such a man out of such material, by an alchemy that can convert base metal into fine gold; as showing the most wonderful condescension of His love in taking to His heart man, into whose flesh the rotting leprosy of sin has eaten.

Such a man will glorify God by becoming a conscious herald of His praise. He who has God in his heart will magnify Him by lip and life. Redeemed men are 'secretaries of His praise' to men, and 'to principalities

and powers in heavenly places is made known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God.'

He who thus glorifies God is held in God's hand.

'None shall pluck them out of My Father's hand.'

All this will be perfected in heaven. Redeemed men lead the universal chorus that thunders forth 'glory to Him that sitteth on the throne.'

'He shall come to be glorified in His saints.'

'Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son also may glorify Thee.'

### THE FOUNDATION OF GOD

'Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.'—ISAIAH xxviii. 16.

'THEREFORE thus saith the Lord.' Then these great words are God's answer to something. And that something is the scornful defiance by the rulers of Israel of the prophet's threatenings. By their deeds, whether by their words or no, they said that they had made friends of their enemies, and that so they were sure that, whatsoever came, they were safe. To this contemptuous and false reliance God answers, not as we might expect, first of all, by a repetition of the threatenings, but by a majestic disclosure of the sure refuge which He has provided, set in contrast to the flimsy and false ones, on which these men built their truculent confidence; 'I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.' And then, after the exhibition of the great mercy which has been evoked by the very blasphemy of the rulers, and not till then, does He reiterate the threatenings of judgment, against which this founda-

tion is laid, that men may escape ; God first declares the refuge, and then warns of the tempest.

Without entering at all upon the question, which for all believing and simple souls is settled by the New Testament, of the Messianic application of the words before us, I take it for granted. There may no doubt be an allusion here to the great solid blocks which travellers tell us may still be seen at the base of the encircling walls of the Temple hill. A stone so gigantic and so firm God has laid for man to build upon.

I. Note, then, first, the foundation, which is Christ.

There are many aspects of the great thought on which I cannot touch even for a moment. For instance, let me remind you how, in a very deep sense, Jesus Christ is the foundation of the whole of the divine dealings with us ; and how, in another aspect, historically, since the day on which He appeared on earth, He has more and more manifestly and completely been the foundation of the whole history of the world. But passing these aspects, let us rather fix upon those which are more immediately in the prophet's mind.

Jesus Christ is the foundation laid for all men's security against every tempest or assault. The context has portrayed the coming of a tremendous storm and inundation, in view of which this foundation is laid. The building reared on it then is, therefore, to be a refuge and an asylum. Have not we all of us, like these scornful men in Jerusalem, built our refuges on vain hopes, on creatural affections, on earthly possessions, on this, that, and the other false thing, all of which are to be swept away when the storm comes? And does there not come upon us all the blast of the ordinary calamities to which flesh is heir, and have we not all more or less consciousness of our own evil and sinful-

ness ; and does there not lie before every one of us at the end of life that solemn last struggle, and beyond that, as we most of us believe, a judgment for all that we have done in the body? 'I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.' Build upon that, and neither the tempest of earthly calamities, changes, disappointments, sorrows, losses, nor the scourge that is wielded because of our sins, nor the last wild tempest that sweeps a man on the wings of its strong blast from out of life into the dark region, nor the solemn final retribution and judgment, shall ever touch us. And when the hail sweeps away the refuge of lies, and the waters overflow the hiding-place, this foundation stands sure—

And lo! from sin and grief and shame  
I hide me, Jesus, in Thy name.

Brethren, the one foundation on which building, we can build secure, and safe as well as secure, is that foundation which is laid in the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God. The foundation of all our security is Jesus Christ.

We may look at the same thought under somewhat different aspects. He is the foundation for all our thinking and opinions, for all our belief and our knowledge. 'In Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' and whatsoever of solid fact men can grasp in their thinkings in regard to all the most important facts and truths with which they come into relation, is to be found in the life and death of Jesus Christ, and in the truths which these reveal. He is the foundation of all our knowledge of God, and of all our true knowledge of ourselves, of all our true knowledge of duty, and all our true knowledge of the relations between the present and the future, between man and God.



And in His life, in the history of His death and resurrection, is the only foundation for any real knowledge of the awful mysteries that lie beyond the grave. He is the Alpha from whom all truth must be deduced, the Omega to which it all leads up. Certitude is in Him. Apart from Him we are but groping amid peradventures. If we *know* anything about God it is due to Jesus Christ. If we *know* anything about ourselves it is due to Him. If we *know* anything about what men ought to do, it is because He has done all human duty. And if, into the mist and darkness that wraps the future, there has ever travelled one clear beam of insight, it is because He has died and risen again. If we have Him, and ponder upon the principles that are involved in, and flow from, the facts of His life and death, then we know; and 'the truth as it is in Jesus' is the truth indeed. To possess Him is to hold the key to all mysteries, and knowledge without Him is but knowledge of the husk, the kernel being all unreached. That Stone is the foundation on which the whole stately fabric of man's knowledge of the highest things must ever be reared.

He is the foundation of all restful love. A Czar of Russia, in the old days, was mad enough to build a great palace upon the ice-blocks of the Neva. And when the spring came, and the foundations melted, the house, full of delights and luxury, sank beneath the river. We build upon frozen water, and when the thaw comes, what we build sinks and is lost to sight. Instead of love that twines round the creature and trails, bleeding and bruised, along the ground when the prop is taken away, let us turn our hearts to the warm, close, pure, perfect changeless love of the undying Christ, and we shall build above the fear of

change. The dove's nest in the pine-tree falls in ruin when the axe is laid to the root. Let us build our nests in the clefts of the rock and no hand will ever reach them. Christ is the foundation on which we may build an immortal love.

He is the foundation for all noble and pure living. He is the fixed pattern to which it may be conformed. Otherwise man's notions of what is virtuous and good are much at the mercy of conventional variations of opinion. This class, that community, this generation, that school, all differ in their notions of what is true nobleness and goodness of life. And we are left at the mercy of fluctuating standards unless we take Christ in His recorded life as the one realised ideal of manhood, the pattern of what we ought to be. We cannot find a fixed and available model for conduct anywhere so useful, so complete, so capable of application to all varieties of human life and disposition as we find in Him, who was not this man or that man, in whom the manly and the feminine, the gentle and the strong, the public and the private graces were equally developed. In Christ there is no limitation or taint. In Christ there is nothing narrow or belonging to a school. This water has no taste of any of the rocks through which it flowed. You cannot say of Jesus Christ that He is a Jew or a Gentile, that He is man or woman, that He is of the ancient age or the modern type, that He is cut after this pattern or that. All beauty and all grace are in Him, and every man finds there the example that he needs. So, as the perfect pattern, He is the foundation for all noble character.

As the one sufficient motive for holy and beautiful living, He is the foundation. 'If ye love Me, keep

My commandments.' That is a new thing in the world's morality, and that one motive, and that motive alone, has power, as the spring sunshine has, to draw beauty from out the little sheaths of green, and to tempt the radiance of the flowers to unfold their lustre. They that find the reason and the motive for goodness and purity in Christ's love to them, and their answering love to Christ, will build a far fairer fabric of a life than any others, let them toil at the building as they may. So, dear brethren, on this foundation God has built His mercy to all generations, and on this foundation you and I may build our safety, our love, our thinkings, our obedience, and rest secure.

II. Note next the tried preciousness of the foundation.

The language of the text, 'a stone of proof,' as it reads in the original, probably means a stone which has been tested and stood the trial. And because it is thus a tested stone, it therefore is a precious stone. There are two kinds of testing—the testing from the assaults of enemies, and the testing by the building upon it of friends. And both these methods of proof have been applied, and it has stood the test.

Think of all the assaults that have been made from this side and the other against Christ and His gospel, and what has become of them all? Travellers tell us how they often see some wandering tribes of savage Arabs trying to move the great stones, for instance, of Baalbec—those wonders of unfinished architecture. But what can a crowd of such people, with all their crowbars and levers, do to the great stone bedded there, where it has been for centuries? They cannot stir it one hair's-breadth. And so, against Jesus Christ and His gospel there has stormed for eighteen

hundred years an assaulting crowd, varying in its individuals and in its methods of attack, but the same in its purpose, and the same in the fruitlessness of its effort. Century after century they have said, as they are saying to-day, '*Now* the final assault is going to be delivered; it can never stand *this*.' And when the smoke has cleared away there may be a little blackening upon the edge, but there is not a chip off its bulk, and it stands in its bed where it did; and of all the grand preparations for a shattering explosion, nothing is left but a sulphurous smell, and a wreath of smoke, and both are floating away down into the distance. Generation after generation has attacked the gospel; generation after generation has been foiled; and I do not need to be a prophet, or the son of a prophet, to be quite sure of this, that all who to-day are trying to destroy men's faith in the Incarnate Son of God, who died for them and rose again, will meet the same fate. I can see the ancient and discredited systems of unbelief, that have gone down into oblivion, rising from their seats, as the prophet in his great vision saw the kings of the earth, to greet the last comer who had fought against God and failed, with '*Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?*' The stone will stand, whosoever tries to blow it up with his dynamite, or to pound it with his hammers.

But there is the other kind of testing. One proves the foundation by building upon it. If the stone be soft, if it be slender, if it be imperfectly bedded, it will crumble, it will shift, it will sink. But this stone has borne all the weight that the world has laid upon it, and borne it up. Did any man ever come to Jesus Christ with a sorrow that He could not comfort, with

a sin that He could not forgive, with a soul that He could not save? And we may trust Him to the end. He is a 'tried stone.' 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles,' has been the experience of nineteen centuries.

So, being tried, it is precious,—precious to God who laid it there at a great and real cost to Himself—having given up 'His only begotten Son'; precious, inasmuch as building upon it is the one safety from the raging tempest and flood that would else engulf and destroy us.

III. Note, next, the process of building.

The metaphor seems to be abandoned in the last words of our text, but it is only apparently so. 'He that believeth shall not make haste.' So, then, we build by believing. The act of building is simple faith in Jesus Christ. We *come* to Him, as the Apostle Peter has it in his quotation of this text—come to Him as unto a living stone, and the coming and the building are both of them metaphors for the one simple thing, trust in the Lord. The bond that unites men on earth with Christ in Heaven, is the exercise of simple faith in Him. By it they come into contact with Him, and receive from Him the security and the blessing that He can bestow. Nothing else brings a man into living fellowship with Him. When we trust in the Lord we, as it were, are bedded into Him; and resting upon Him with all our weight, then we are safe. That confidence involves the abandonment of all the 'refuges of lies.' There must be utter self-distrust and forsaking and turning away from every dependence upon anything else, if we are to trust ourselves to Jesus Christ. But the figure of a foundation which gives security and stability to the stones laid upon it, does

not exhaust all the blessedness of this building upon Christ. For when we really rest upon Him, there comes from the foundation up through all the courses a vital power. Thus Peter puts it: 'To whom, coming as unto a living stone, ye also as living stones are built up.' We might illustrate this by the supposition of some fortress perched upon a rock, and in the heart of the rock a clear fountain, which is guided by some pipe or other into the innermost rooms of the citadel. Thus, builded upon Christ, 'our defence shall be the munitions of rocks, and our waters shall be sure.' From Him, the foundation, there will rise into all the stones, built upon Him, the power of His own endless life, and they, too, become living stones.

IV. So note, lastly, the quiet confidence of the builders.

'He that believeth shall not *make haste*.' The word is somewhat obscure, and the LXX., which is followed by the New Testament, renders it, 'Shall not be confounded or put to shame.' But the rendering of our text seems to be accurate enough. 'He shall not make haste.' Remember the picture of the context—a suddenly descending storm, a swiftly rising and turbid flood, the lashing of the rain, the howling of the wind. The men in the clay-built hovels on the flat have to take to flight to some higher ground above the reach of the inundation, on some sheltered rock out of the lashing of the rain and the force of the tempest. He who is built upon the true foundation knows that his house is above the water-level, and he does not need to be in a hurry. He can remain quietly there till the flood subsides, knowing that it will not rise high enough to drown or even disturb him. When all the other buildings are gone, his stands. And he that

thus dwells on high may look out over the wild flood, washing and weltering to the horizon, and feel that he is safe. So shall he not have to make haste, but may wait calm and quiet, knowing that all is well.

Dear friends, there is only one refuge for any of us—only one from the little annoyances and from the great ones; from to-day's petty troubles, and from the day of judgment; from the slight stings, if I may so say, of little sorrows, cares, burdens, and from the poisoned dart of the great serpent. There is only one refuge for any of us, to build upon Jesus Christ, as we can do by simple faith.

And oh! remember, He must either be the foundation on which we build, or the stone of stumbling against which we stumble, and which one day will fall upon us and grind us to powder. Do you make your choice; and when God says, as He says to each of us: 'Behold! I lay in Zion a foundation,' do you say, 'And, Lord, I build upon the foundation which Thou hast laid.'

### GOD'S STRANGE WORK

'That He may do His work, His strange work; and bring to pass His act, His strange act.'—ISAIAH xxviii. 21.

How the great events of one generation fall dead to another! There is something very pathetic in the oblivion that swallows up world-resounding deeds. Here the prophet selects two instances which to him are solemn and singular examples of divine judgment, and we have difficulty in finding out to what he refers. To him they seemed the most luminous illustrations he could find of the principle which he is proclaiming,

and to us all the light is burned out of them. They are the darkest portion of the verse. Several different events have been suggested. But most probably the historical references here are to David's slaughter of the Philistines (2 Sam. v., and 1 Chron. xiv.). This is probable, but by no means certain. If so, the words are made still more threatening by asserting that He will treat the Israelites as if they were Philistines. But the point on which we should concentrate attention is this remarkable expression, according to which judgment is God's strange work. And that is made more emphatic by the use of a word translated 'act,' which means service, and is almost always used for work that is hard and heavy—a toil or a task.

I. The work in which God delights.

It is here implied that the opposite kind of activity is congenial to Him. The text declares judgment to be an anomaly, out of His ordinary course of action and foreign to His nature.

We may pause for a moment on that great thought that God has a usual course of action, which is usual because it is the spontaneous expression and true mirror of His character. What He thus does shows that character to His creatures, who cannot see Him but in the glass of His works, and have to infer His nature, as they best may, from His works. The Bible begins with His nature and thence interprets His work.

The work in which God delights is the utterance of His love in blessing.

The very essence of love is self-manifestation.

The very being of God is love, and all being delights in its own self-manifestation, in its own activity.

How great the thought is that He is glad when we let Him satisfy His nature by making us glad!



The ordinary course of His government in the world is blessing.

II. The Task in which He does not delight, or His Strange Work.

The consequences of sin are God's work. The miseries consequent on sin are self-inflicted, but they are also God's judgments on sin. We may say that sin automatically works out its results, but its results follow by the will of God on account of sin.

That work is a necessity arising from the nature of God. It is foreign to His heart but not to His nature. God is both 'the light of Israel' for blessing, and 'a consuming fire.' The two opposite effects are equally the result of the contact of God and man. Light pains a diseased eye and gladdens a sound one. The sun seen through a mist becomes like a ball of red-hot iron. The whole revelation of God becomes a pain to an unloving soul.

But God's very love compels Him to punish.

Some modern notions of the love of God seem to strike out righteousness from His nature altogether, and substitute for it a mere good nature which is weakness, not love, and is cruelty, not kindness.

There is nothing in the facts of the world or in the teachings of the gospel which countenances the notion of a God whose fondness prevents Him from scourging.

What do you call it when a father spares the rod and spoils the child?

Even this world is a very serious place for a man who sets himself against its laws. Its punishments come down surely and not always slowly. There is nothing in it to encourage the idea of impunity.

That work is to Him an Unwelcome Necessity. Bold

words. 'I have no pleasure in the death of a sinner.' 'He doth not willingly inflict.' The awful power of sin to divert the current of blessing. Christ's tears over Jerusalem. How unwelcome that work is to them is shown by the slowness of His judgments, by multiplied warnings. 'Rising up early,' He tells men that He will smite, in order that He may never need to smite.

That work is a certainty. However reluctantly He smites, the blow *will* fall.

### III. The Strange Work of Redemption.

The mightiest miracle. The revelation of God's deepest nature. The wonder of the universe.

## THE HUSBANDMAN AND HIS OPERATIONS

'Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech. 24. Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground? 25. When he hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place? 26. For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him. 27. For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod. 28. Bread corn is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break it with the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen. 29. This also cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working.'—ISAIAH xxviii. 23-29.

THE prophet has been foretelling a destruction which he calls God's *strange* act. The Jews were incredulous, 'scornful men.' They did not believe him; and the main reason for their incredulity was that a divine destruction of the nation was so opposite to the divine conservation of it as to amount to an impossibility. God had raised up and watched over the people. He had planted it in the mountain of His inheritance, and now was it going to be thrown down by the same hand which had built it up? Impossible.

The prophet's answer to that question is this parable of the husbandman, who has to perform a great variety of operations. He ploughs, but that is not all. He lays aside the plough when it has done its work, and takes up the seed-basket, and, in different ways, sows different seeds, scattering some broadcast, and dropping others carefully, grain by grain, into their place—'dibbling' it in, as we should say. But seedtime too, passes, and then he cuts down what he had so carefully sown, and pulls up what he had so sedulously planted, and, in different ways, breaks and bruises the grain. Is he inconsistent because he ploughs in winter and reaps in harvest? Does his carrying the seed-basket at one time make it impossible that he shall come with flail and threshing-oxen at another? Are not all the various operations co-operant to one end? Does not the end need them all? Is not one purpose going steadily forward through ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing? Is not that like the work of the great Husbandman, who changes His methods and preserves His plan through them all, who has His 'time to sow' and His 'time to reap,' and who orders the affairs of men and kingdoms, for the one purpose that He may gather His wheat into His garner, and purge from it its chaff?

This parable sets forth a philosophy of the divine operations very beautiful and true, and none the less impressive for the simple garb in which it is clothed.

I. All things come from one steady, divine purpose.

We may notice in passing how reverentially the prophet believes that agriculture is taught by God. He would have said the same of cotton-spinning or coal-mining. Think how striking a figure that is,

of all the world as God's farm, where He practises His husbandry to grow the crops which He desires.

What a picture the parable gives of sedulous and patient labour for a far-off result!

It insists on the thought of one steady divine purpose ever directing the movements of the divine hand.

That is the negation of the godless theory that the affairs of men are merely the work of men, or are merely the result of impersonal causes. The world is not a jungle where any or every plant springs of itself, but it is cultivated ground which has an Owner who looks after it.

It is the affirmation that God's action is regulated by a purpose which is intelligent, unchanging, all-embracing to us because revealed.

II. That steady purpose is man's highest good.

The end of all the farmer's care is the ripening of the seed. God's purpose is our moral, intellectual, and spiritual perfecting.

Neither His own 'glory' nor man's 'happiness,' which are taken by different schools of thought to be the divine aim in creation and providence, is an object worthy of Him or adequate to explain the facts of every man's experience, unless both are regarded as needing man's perfecting, for their attainment. God's glory is to make men godlike. Man's happiness cannot be secured without His holiness.

God has larger and nobler designs for us than merely to make us happy.

'This is the will of God concerning you, even your sanctification.'

Nothing short of that end would be worthy of God, or would explain His methods.

III. That purpose needs great variety of processes.

This is true about nations and about individuals.

Different stages of growth need different treatment.

The parable names three operations:—

Ploughing, which is preparation ;

Sowing, or casting in germinating principles ;

Threshing, which is effected by tribulation, a word which means driving a 'tribulum' or threshing-sedge over ears of grain.

So sorrow is indispensable for our perfecting.

By it earthly affections are winnowed away, and our dependence on God increased. A certain refinement of spirit results, like the pallor on the face of a chronic invalid, which has a delicate beauty unattainted by ruddy health. A capacity for sympathy, too, is often the result of one's own trials. Rightly borne, they tend to bend or break the will, and they teach how great it is to suffer and be strong.

But sorrow is not enough ; joy is indispensable too. The crop is threshed in tribulation, but is grown mostly in sunshine. Calm, uneventful hours, continuous possession of blessings, have a ministry not less than afflictions have. The corn in the furrow, waving in the western wind, and with golden sunlight among its golden stems, is preparing for the loaf no less than when bound in bundles and lying on the threshing-floor, or cut and bruised by sharp teeth of dray or heavy hoofs of oxen, or blows of swinging flails.

So do not suppose that sorrow is the only instrument for perfecting character, and see that you do not miss the sanctifying and ripening effect of your joyous hours.

Again, different types of character require different modes of treatment. In the parable, 'the fitches' are sown in one fashion, and 'the cummin' in another

the 'wheat' and 'barley' in still another; and similar variety marks the methods of separating the grain from the husk, one kind of crop being threshed, another having a wheel turned upon it. Thus each of us gets the kind of joys and pains that will have most effect on us. God knows where is the tenderest spot, and makes no mistakes in His dealing. He sends us 'afflictions sorted, sorrows of all sizes.'

Let us see that we trust to His loving and wise adaptation of our trials to our temperaments and needs. Let us see that we never let clouds obscure the clearness of our perception, or, failing perception, the serenity of our trust, that all things work together, and all work for our highest good—our being made like our Lord. We should less often complain of the mysteries of Providence if we had learned the meaning of Isaiah's parable.

IV. All the processes end in garnering the grain.

There is a barn or storehouse for the ripened and threshed crops. The farmer's toil and careful processes would be absurd and unintelligible if, after them all, the crop, so sedulously ripened and cultivated and cleansed, was left to rot where it fell. And no less certainly does the discipline of this life cry aloud for heaven and a conscious personal future life, if it is not to be all set down as grim irony or utterly absurd. There must be a heaven if we are not to be put to intellectual bewilderment.

What was needed for growth here drops away there, as blossoms fall when their work is done. Sunshine and rain are no more necessary when the fields are cleared and the barn-yard is filled. Much in our nature, in our earthly condition, in God's varying processes, will drop away. When school-time is done

the rod is burned. But nothing will perish that can contribute to our perfecting.

So let us ask Him to purge us with His fan in His hand now, lest we should be found at last fruitless cumberers of the ground or chaff which is rootless, and fit only to be swept out of the threshing-floor.

### 'QUIETNESS AND CONFIDENCE'

'In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.'—ISAIAH XXX. 15.

ISRAEL always felt the difficulty of sustaining itself on the height of dependence on the unseen, spiritual power of God, and was ever oscillating between alliances with the Northern and Southern powers, linking itself with Assyria against Egypt, or with Egypt against Assyria. The effect was that whichever was victorious it suffered; it was the battleground for both, it was the prize of each in turn. The prophet's warnings were political wisdom as truly as religious.

Here Judah is exhorted to forsake the entangling dependence on Egypt, and to trust wholly to God. They had gone away from Him in their fears. They must come back by their faith. To them the great lesson was trust in God. Through them to us the same lesson is read. The principle is far wider than this one case. It is the one rule of life for us all.

The two clauses of the text convey substantially the same idea. They are in inverted parallelism. 'Returning and rest' correspond to 'quietness and confidence,' so as that 'rest' answers to 'quietness' and 'returning' to 'confidence.' In the former clause we

have the action towards God and then its consequence. In the latter we have the consequence and then the action.

I. The returning.

Men depart from God by speculative thought or by anxious care, or by sin.

To 'return' is just to trust.

The parallel helps us here—'returning' is parallel with 'confidence.' This confidence is to be exercised especially in relation to one's own path in life and the outward trials and difficulties which we meet, but its sphere extends far beyond these. It is a disposition of mind which covers all things. The attitude of trust, the sense of dependence, the assurance of God's help and love are in all life the secrets of peace and power.

Am I sinful? then trust. Am I bewildered and ignorant? then trust. Am I anxious and harassed? then trust.

Note the thought, that we come back to God by simple confidence, not by preparing ourselves, not by our expiation, but only by trusting in Him.

Of course the temptations to the opposite attitude are many and great.

Note, too, that every want of confidence is a departure from God. We go away from Him not only by open sin, not only by denial of Him, but by forgetfulness, by want of faith.

The *ground* of this confidence is laid in our knowledge of Him, especially in our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The *exercise* of this confidence is treated as voluntary. Every man is responsible for his faith.

The *elements* of this confidence are, as regards ourselves, our sense of want in all its various aspects; and,



as regards Him, our assurance of His love, of His nearness to help.

II. Confiding nearness to God brings quiet rest.

'Rest' and 'being quiet' are treated here partly as consequences of faith, partly as duties which we are bound to strive to achieve.

1. See how confidence in God stills and quiets the soul.

The very exercise of communion with Him brings peace and rest, inasmuch as all things are then possessed which we can desire. There is a still fruition which nothing can equal and nothing destroy.

Trust in God brings rest from our own evil consciences.

It brings rest from our own plans and purposes.

Trust gives insight into the meaning of all this else unintelligible world.

It brings the calming and subduing of desires, which in their eagerness torture, in their fruition trouble, and in their disappointment madden.

It brings the gathering in of ourselves from all the disturbing diffusion of ourselves through earthly trifles.

2. Notice what this rest is not.

It does not mean the absence of causes of disturbance.

It does not mean the abnegation of forethought.

It does not mean an indolent passiveness.

3. Notice the duty of being thus quiet and resting.

How much we fail in this respect.

We have faith, but there seems some obstruction which stops it from flowing refreshingly through our lives.

We are bound to seek for its increased continuity and power in our hearts and lives.

III. Confidence and rest in God bring safety and strength.

That is true in the lowest sense of 'saved,' and not less true in the highest. The condition of all our salvation from temporal as well as spiritual evils lies thus in the same thing—that we trust God.

No harm comes to us when we trust, because then God is with us, and works for us, and cares for us. So all departments of life are bound together by the one law. Trust is the condition of being 'saved.'

And not only so, but also trust is strength. God works *for* us; yes, but better than that, God works *in* us and fits *us* to work.

What powers we might be in the world! Trust should make us strong. To have confidence in God should bring us power to which all other power is as nothing. He who can feel that his foot is on the rock, how firm he should stand!

Rest gives strength. The rest of faith doubles our forces. To be freed from anxious care makes a man much more likely to act vigorously and to judge wisely.

Stillness of soul, born of communion with God, makes us strong.

Stillness of soul, born of deliverance from our fears, makes us strong.

Here then is a golden chain—or shall we rather say a live wire?—whereof one end is bound to the Throne and the other encircles our poor hearts. Trust, so shall we be at rest and safe. Being at rest and safe, we shall be strong. If we link ourselves with God by faith, God will flash into us His mysterious energy, and His strength will be made perfect in our weakness.

## GOD'S WAITING AND MAN'S

'And therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have mercy upon you : for the Lord is a God of judgment : blessed are they that wait for Him.'—ISAIAH XXX. 18.

GOD'S waiting and man's—bold and beautiful, that He and we should be represented as sharing the same attitude.

### I. God's waiting.

1. The first thought is—why should He wait—why does He not act at once? Because something in us hinders. We cannot enter into spiritual blessings till we are made capable of them by faith. It would not be for our good to receive some temporal blessings till sorrow has done its work on us. The great thought here is that God has a right time for help. He is 'a God of judgment,' *i.e.* discerns our moral condition and shapes His dealings thereby. He never gives the wrong medicine.

2. His waiting is full of work to fit us to receive His grace. It is not a mere passive standing by, till the fit conditions are seen in us; but He 'is exalted' while He waits, *i.e.* lifted up in the manifestation of His might, and by His energy in preparing us for the gifts that He has prepared for us. 'He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God.' He who prepares a place for us is preparing us for the place. He who has grace which He is ready to give us here, is making us ready for His grace. The meaning of all God's work on us is to form a character fit to possess His highest gifts.

3. His waiting is very patient. The divine husbandman 'waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it.' How wonderful that in a very real

sense He attends on our pleasure, as it were, and lets us determine His time to work.

4. That waiting is full of divine desire to help. It is not the waiting of indifference, which says: 'If you will have it—well and good. If not, it does not matter to Me.' But 'more than they that watch for the morning,' God waits 'that He may be gracious unto you.'

## II. Man's waiting.

Our attitude is to be in some real sense analogous to His.

Its main elements are firm anticipation, patient expectation, steadfast desire, self-discipline to fit us for the influx of God's grace.

We are not to prescribe 'times and seasons which the Father hath put in His own power.' The clock of Eternity ticks more slowly than our short-pendulumed timepieces. 'If the vision tarry, wait for it.' We may well wait for God when we know that He waits for us, and that, for the most part, when He sees that we are waiting, He knows that His time is come.

But it is to be noted that the waiting desire to which He responds is directed to something better and greater than any gifts from Him, even to Himself, for it is they who 'wait for *Him*,' not only for His benefits apart from Himself, however precious these may be, who are blessed.

The blessedness of such waiting, how it calms the heart, brings into constant touch with God, detaches from the fever and the fret which kill, opens our eyes to mark the meanings of our life's history, and makes the divine gifts infinitely more precious when they do come.

After all, the time of waiting is at the longest very short. And when the perfect fruition is come, and we

enter into the great spaces of Eternity, it will seem as an handbreadth.

‘Take it on trust a little while,  
Thou soon shalt read the mystery right  
In the full sunshine of His smile.’

### THREE PICTURES OF ONE REALITY

‘As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also He will deliver it; and passing over He will preserve it.’—ISAIAH xxxi. 5.

THE immediate occasion of this very remarkable promise is, of course, the peril in which Jerusalem was placed by Sennacherib’s invasion; and the fulfilment of the promise was the destruction of his army before its gates. But the promise here, like all God’s promises, is eternal in substance, and applies to a community only because it applies to each member of that community. Jerusalem was saved, and that meant that every house in Jerusalem was saved, and every man in it the separate object of the divine protection. So that all the histories of Scripture, and all the histories of men in the world, are but transitory illustrations of perennial principles, and every atom of the consolation and triumph of this verse comes to each of us, as truly as it did to the men that with tremulous heart began to take cheer, as they listened to Isaiah. There is a wonderful saying in one of the other prophets which carries that lesson, where, bringing down the story of Jacob’s struggle with the angel of Peniel to the encouragement of the existing generation, he says, ‘He spake to *us*.’ They were hundreds of years after the patriarch, and yet had fallen heirs to all that God had ever said to him. So, from that

point of view, I am not spiritualising, or forcing the meaning of these words, when I bring them direct into the lives of each one of ourselves.

I. And, first, I would note the very striking and beautiful pictures that are given in these verses.

There are three of them, on each of which I must touch briefly. 'As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem.' The form of the words in the original shows that it is the mother-bird that is thought about. And the picture rises at once of her fluttering over the nest, where the callow chickens are, unable to fly and to help themselves. It is a kind of echo of the grand metaphor in the song that is attributed to Moses, which speaks of the eagle fluttering over her nest, and taking care of her young. Jerusalem was as a nest on which, for long centuries, that infinite divine love had brooded. It was but a poor brood that had been hatched out, but yet 'as birds flying' He had watched over the city. Can you not almost see the mother-bird, made bold by maternal love, swooping down upon the intruder that sought to rob the nest, and spreading her broad pinion over the callow fledglings that lie below? That is what God does with us. As I said, it is a poor brood that is hatched out. That does not matter; still the Love bends down and helps. Nobody but a prophet could have ventured on such a metaphor as that, and nobody but Jesus Christ would have ventured to mend it and say, 'As a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings,' when there are hawks in the sky. So He, in all the past ages, was the One that 'as birds flying . . . defended' His people, and would have gathered them under His wings, only they would not.

Now, beautiful as this metaphor is, as it stands, it

seems to me, like some brilliant piece of colouring, to derive additional beauty from its connection with the background upon which it stands out. For just a verse before the prophet has given another emblem of what God is and does, and if you will carry with you all those thoughts of tenderness and maternal care and solicitude, and then connect them with that verse, I think the thought of His tenderness will start up into new beauty. For here is what precedes the text: 'Like as a lion, and the young lion roaring on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor bow himself for the noise of them. So shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion.' Look at these two pictures side by side, on the one hand the lion, with his paw on his prey, and the angry growl that answers when the shepherds vainly try to drag it away from him. That is God. Ay! but that is only an aspect of God. 'As birds flying, so the Lord will defend Jerusalem.' We have to take that into account too. This generation is very fond of talking about God's love; does it believe in God's wrath? It is very fond of speaking about the gentleness of Jesus; has it pondered that tremendous phrase, 'the wrath of the Lamb'? The lion that growls, and the mother-bird that hovers—God is like them both. That is the first picture that is here.

The second one is not so obvious to English readers, but it is equally striking, though I do not mean to dwell upon it. The word that is translated in our text twice, 'defend' and 'defending'—'So will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem, and defending will deliver'—means, literally, 'shielding.' Thus we have the same general idea as that in the previous meta-

phor of the mother-bird hovering above the nest: God is like a shield held over us, and so flinging off from the broad and burnished surface of the Almighty buckler, all the darts that any foe can launch against us. 'Our God is a Sun and Shield.' I need not enlarge on this familiar metaphor.

But the third picture I wish to point to in more detail: 'Passing over, He will deliver.' Now, the word that is there rendered 'passing over,' is almost a technical word in the Old Testament, because it is that employed in reference to the Passover. And so you see the swiftness of genius with which the prophet changes his whole scene. We had the nest and the mother-bird, we had the battlefield and the shield; now we are swept away back to that night when the Destroying Angel stalked through the land, and 'passed over' the doors on which the blood had been sprinkled. And thus this God, who in one aspect may be likened to the mother-bird hovering with her little breast full of tenderness, and made brave by maternal love conquering natural timidity, and in another aspect may be likened to the broad shield behind which a man stands safe, may also be likened to that Destroying Angel that went through Egypt, and smote wherever there were not the tokens of the blood on the lintels, and 'passed over' wherever there were. Of course, the original fulfilment of this third picture is the historical case of the army of Sennacherib; outside the walls, widespread desolation; inside the walls, an untroubled night of peace. That night in Egypt is paralleled, in the old Jewish hymn that is still sung at the Passover, with the other night when Sennacherib's men were slain; and the parallel is based on our text. So, then, here is another illustration of



what I started with saying, that the past events of Scripture are transient expressions of perennial principles and tendencies. For the Passover night was not to be to the contemporaries of the prophet an event receding ever further into the dim distance, but it was a present event, and to be reproduced in that catastrophe when 'in the morning when they arose, they were all dead corpses.' And the event is being repeated to-day, and will be for each of us, if we will.

So, then, there are these three pictures—the Nest and the Mother-bird, the Battlefield and the Shield, Egypt and the Destroying Angel.

II. We note the reality meant by these pictures.

They mean the absolute promise from God of protection for His people from *every* evil. We are not to cut it down, not to say that it applies absolutely in regard to the spiritual world, but that it does not apply in regard to temporal things. Yes, it does entirely; only you have to rise to the height of God's conception of what is good and what is evil in regard to outward things, before you understand how completely, and without qualification or deduction, this promise is fulfilled to every man that puts his trust in Him. Of course, I do not need to remind you, for your own lives will do so sufficiently, that this hovering protector, this strong Shield, this Destroying Angel that passes by our houses if the blood is on the threshold, does not guarantee us any exemption from the common 'ills that flesh is heir to.' We all know that well enough. But what does it guarantee? That all the poison shall be wiped off the arrow, that all the evil shall be taken out of the evil, that it will change its character, that if we observe the conditions, the sharpest sorrow will come to us with this written on

it by the Father's hand, 'With My love to My child'; that pain will be discipline, and discipline will be blessed. Ah! dear friends! I am sure there are many of us that can set to our seals that God is true in this matter, and that we have found that His rod does blossom, and that our sorest sorrows have been our greatest mercies, drawing us nearer to Him; 'Defending He will deliver, and passing over He will preserve.'

III. And now let me remind you of the way by which we can make the reality of these pictures ours.

You know that all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament are conditional, and that there are many of them that were never fulfilled, and were spoken in order that they might not be fulfilled, if only the people took warning. I wish folk would carry a little more consciously in their minds that principle in interpreting them all, and in asking about their fulfilment. Not only in regard to these ancient events, but in regard to our individual experience, God's promises and threatenings are conditional.

Take that first metaphor of the hovering mother-bird. Listen to this expansion of it in one of the psalms: 'He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust.' The word for *trust* here means to 'fly into a refuge.' Can you not see the picture? A little brood round the parent bird, frightened by some beast of prey, or hovering hawk in the sky, and fluttering under its wings, and all safe and huddled together there close against the warm breast, and in amongst the downy feathers. 'Under His wings shalt thou trust.' Put thou thy trust in God, and God is to thee the hovering bird, the broad shield, the Angel that 'passes over.'

Take the other picture of the Passover night. Only

by our individual faith in Jesus Christ as our individual Saviour can we put the blood on our door-posts so that the Destroying Angel shall pass by. So, if we would have the sweetness of such words as these fulfilled in our daily lives, however disturbed and troubled and sorrowful and solitary they may be, the first condition is that under His wings shall we flee for refuge, and we do so by trust in Him.

But having thus fled thither, we must continue there, if we would continue under His protection. Such continuance of safety because of continuous faith is possible only by continued communion. Remember our Lord's expansion of the metaphor in His lament: 'How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not.' We can resist the drawing. We can get away from the shelter of the wing. We can lift up our wills against Him. And what becomes of the chicken that does *not* run to the mother's pinions when the hawk is hovering? That is what becomes of the man that stops outside the refuge in Christ, or that by failure of his faith departs from that refuge. 'Ye would not; therefore your house is left unto you desolate.' That house, in the Jerusalem which God 'defends,' is *not* defended.

Another condition of divine protection is obedience. We need not expect that God will take care of us, and preserve us, when we did not ask His leave to get into the dangerous place that we find ourselves in. Many of us do the converse of what the Apostle condemns, we begin 'in the flesh,' and think we shall end 'in the Spirit'; which being translated is, we do not ask God's leave to do certain things, to enter into certain engagements or arrangements with other people, and

the like, and then we expect God to come and help us in or out of them. That is by no means an uncommon form of delusion. You remember what Jesus Christ said when the Devil tried to entice Him to do a thing of that sort, by quoting Scripture to Him—‘He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee, to keep Thee in all Thy ways. Cast Thyself down. Trust to the promise as a kind of parachute to keep Thee from falling bruised on the stones of the Temple-court.’ Christ’s answer was: ‘Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.’ You will not get God’s protection in ways of your own choosing.

And so, brethren, ‘all things work together for good to them that love,’ to them that trust, to them that keep close, to them that obey. And for such the old faithful promise will be faithful and new once more, ‘Because He hath set His love upon Me, therefore will I deliver Him’—that will be the summing up of our lives; ‘and I will set Him on high because He hath known My Name,’ that will be the meaning of our deaths.

### THE LORD’S FURNACE

‘The Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.’—ISAIAH xxxi. 9.

THIS very remarkable characterisation of God stands here as a kind of seal, set upon the preceding prophecy. It is the reason why that will certainly be fulfilled. And what precedes is mainly a promise of a deliverance for Israel, which was to be a destruction for Israel’s enemies. It is put in very graphic and remarkable metaphors: ‘Like as a lion roareth on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him,

he will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them: so shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion.' The enemies of Israel are picturesquely and poetically represented as a crowd of shepherds vainly trying to scare a lion by their shouts. He stands undaunted, with his strong paw on his prey, and the boldest of them durst not venture to drag it from beneath his claws. So, says Isaiah, with singularly daring imagery, God will put all His strength into keeping fast hold of Israel, and no one can pluck His people from His hands.

Then, with a sudden and striking change of metaphor, the prophet passes from a picture of the extreme of fierceness to one of the extreme of tenderness. 'As birds flying'—mother birds fluttering over their nests—'so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem,' hovering over it and going from side to side to defend with His broad pinions, 'passing over, He will preserve it.' These figures are next translated into the plain promise of utter discomfiture and destruction, panic and flight as the portion of the enemies of Israel, and the whole has this broad seal set to it, that He who promises is 'the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.'

We shall not understand these great words if we regard them as only a revelation of destructive and terrible power. They are that indeed, but they are far more than that. It is the very beauty and completeness of this emblem that has a double aspect, and is no less rich in joy and blessing than pregnant with warning and terror. As Isaiah says in another place, Jerusalem is 'Ariel,' which probably means 'the hearth of God.' His presence in the city is as a fire for the comfort and defence of the happy inhabitants, and

at the same time for the destruction of all evil and enemies. Far more truly than He dwelt in the city of David does God dwell in the Church, and His presence is its security. What, then, of instruction and hope may we gather from this wonderful emblem?

I. In the Church, God is present as a great reservoir of fervid love.

Every language has taken fire as the symbol of love and emotion. We speak so naturally of warm love, fervent feeling, glowing earnestness, ardent enthusiasm and the like, that we are scarcely aware of using figurative language. We do not usually ascribe emotion to God, but surely the deepest and most sacred of the senses in which it is true that fire is His emblem, is that He is love. His fire is in Zion. He dwells in His Church, a storehouse of blazing love, heated seventy times seven hotter than any creatural love, and pouring out its ardours for the quickening and gladdening of all who walk in the light of that fire, and thaw their coldness at its blaze.

Then, if so, how comes it that so many Christian Churches are ice-houses instead of furnaces? How comes it that they who profess to live in the Zion where this fire flames are themselves so cold? If God's blazing furnace is in Jerusalem, it should send the thermometer up in all the houses of the city. But what a strange contradiction it is for men to be in God's Church, the very focus and centre of His burning love, and themselves to be almost down below zero in their temperature! The Christian Church ought to be all aflame in all its members, with the fire of love kindled and alight from God Himself. Every community of Christian people ought to radiate warmth and light which it has absorbed from its present God.

Our love ought to answer His, and, being caught and kindled from that mighty fire, should throw back to its source some of the heat received, in fervours of reflected love, and should pour the rest beneficently on all around. Love to God and love to man are regarded in Christian morals as beams of the same fire, only travelling in different directions. But what a miserable contrast to such an ideal the reality in so many of our churches is! A fiery furnace with its doors hung with icicles is no greater a contradiction and anomaly than a Christian Church or a single soul, which professes to have been touched by the infinite lovingkindness of God, and yet lives as cold and unmoved as we do. The 'Lord's fire is in Zion.' Are there any tokens of that fire amongst us, in our own hearts and in our collective temperature as Christian Churches?

There is no religion worth calling so which has not warmth in it. We hear a great deal from people against whom I do not wish to say a word, about the danger of an 'emotional Christianity.' Agreed, if by that they mean a Christianity which has no foundation for its emotion in principle and intelligence; but not agreed if they mean to recommend a Christianity which professes to accept truths that might kindle a soul beneath the ribs of death and make the dumb sing, and yet is never moved one hair's-breadth from its quiet phlegmaticism. There is no religion without emotion. Of course it must be intelligent emotion, built upon the acceptance of divine truth, and regulated and guided by that, and so consolidated into principle, and it must be emotion which works for its living, and impels to Christian conduct. These two provisoes being attended to, then we can safely say that warmth is

the test of life, and the readings of the thermometer, which measure the fervour, measure also the reality of our religion. A cold Christian is a contradiction in terms. If the adjective is certainly applicable, I am afraid the applicability of the noun is extremely doubtful. If there is no fire, what is there? Cold is death.

We want no flimsy, transitory, noisy, ignorant, hysterical agitation. Smoke is not fire. If the temperature were higher, and the fire more wisely fed, there would not be any. But we do want a more obvious and powerful effect of their solemn, glorious, and heart-melting beliefs on the affections and emotions of professing Christians, and that they may be more mightily moved by love, to all heroisms and service and enthusiasms and to consecration which shall in some measure answer to the glowing heart of that fire of God which flames in Zion.

II. God's revelation of Himself, and presence in His Church, are an instrument of cleansing.

Fire purifies. In our great cities now there are 'disinfecting ovens,' where infected articles are taken, and exposed to a high temperature which kills the germs of disease, so that tainted things come out sweet and clean. That is what God's furnace in Zion is meant to do for us. The true way of purifying is by fire. To purify by water, as John the Baptist saw and said, is but a poor, cold way of getting outward cleanliness. Water cleanses the surface, and becomes dirty in the process. Fire cleanses within and throughout, and is not tainted thereby. You plunge some foul thing into the flame, and, as you look, the specks and spots melt out of it. Raise the temperature, and you kill the poison germs. That is the way that God cleanses His people; not by external application, but



by getting up the heat. The fire of His love, the fire of His spirit, is, as St. Bernard says, a blessed fire, which 'consumes indeed, but does not hurt; which sweetly burns and blessedly lays waste, and so puts forth the force and fire against our vices, as to display the operation of the anointing oil upon our souls.' The Hebrew captives were flung into the fiery furnace. What did it burn? Only their bonds. They themselves lived and rejoiced in the intense heat. So, if we have any real possession of the divine flame, it will burn off our wrists the bands and chains of our old vices, and we shall stand pure and clean, emancipated by the fire which will consume only our sins, and be for our true selves as our native home, where we walk at liberty and expatiate in the genial warmth. That is the blessed and effectual way of purifying, which slays only the death that we carry about with us in our sin, and makes us the more truly living for its death. Cleansing is only possible if we are immersed in the Holy Ghost and in fire, as some piece of foul clay, plunged into the furnace, has all the stains melted out of it. For all sinful souls seeking after cleansing, and finding that the 'damned spot' will not 'out' for all their washing, it is surely good news and tidings of great joy that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and that its purifying power will burn out all their sin.

III. Further, there is suggested another thought: that God, in His great revelation of Himself, by which He dwells in His Church, is a power of transformation.

Fire turns all which it seizes into fire. 'Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire' (R.V.). The heap of green wood with the sap in it needs but a tiny light pushed into the middle, and soon it is all ablaze, transformed into ruddy brightness, and leaping

heavenwards. However heavy, wet, and obstinate may be the fuel, the fire can change it into aspiring and brilliant flame.

And so God, coming to us in His 'Spirit of burning,' turns us into His own likeness, and makes us possessors of some spark of Himself. Therefore it is a great promise, 'He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost, and in fire.' He shall plunge you into the life-giving furnace, and so 'make His ministers like a flame of fire,' like the Lord whom they serve. The seraphim who stand round the throne are 'burning' spirits, and the purity which shines, the love which glows, the swift life which flames in them, are all derived from that unkindled and all-animating Fire who is their and our God. The transformation of all the dwellers in Zion into miniature likenesses of this fire is the very highest hope that springs from the solemn and blessed truth that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.

IV. But, further, this figure teaches that the same divine fire may become destructive.

The emblem of fire suggests a double operation, and the very felicity of it as an emblem is that it has these two sides, and with equal naturalness may stand for a power which quickens, and for one which destroys. The difference in the effects springs not from differences in the cause, but in the objects with which the fire plays. The same God is the fire of life, the fire of love, of purifying and transformation and glad energy to whosoever will put his trust in Him, and a fire of destruction and anger unto whosoever resists Him. The alternative stands before every soul of man, to be quickened by fire or consumed by it. We may make the furnace of God our blessedness and the reservoir

of a far more joyful and noble life than ever we could have lived in our coldness ; or we may make it terror and destruction. There lie the two possibilities before every one of us. We cannot stand apart from Him ; we have relations with Him, whether we will or no ; He is something to us. He is, and must be for all, a flaming fire. We can settle whether it shall be a fire which is life-giving unto life, or a fire which is death-giving unto death.

Here are two buildings : the one the life of the man that lives apart from God, and therefore has built only with wood, hay, and stubble ; the other the life of the man that lives with God and for Him, and so has built with gold, silver, and precious stones. The day and the fire come ; and the fates of these two are opposite effects of the same cause. The licking tongues surround the wretched hut, built of combustibles, and up go wood and hay and stubble, in a smoking flare, and disappear. The flames play round the gold and silver and precious stones, and every leap of their light is answered by some facet of the gems that flash in their brilliancy, and give back the radiance.

You can settle which of these two is to be your fate. 'The Lord's fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.' To those who, by faith in that dear Lord who came to cast fire on earth, have opened their hearts, to the entrance of that searching, cleansing flame, and who therefore burn with kindred and answering fervours, it is joy to know that their 'God is a consuming fire,' for therein lies their hope of daily purifying and ultimate assimilation. To those, on the other hand, who have closed their hearts to the warmth of His redeeming love in Christ, and the quickening of His baptism by fire, what can the knowledge be but

terror, what can contact with God in judgment be but destruction? 'The day cometh, it burneth as a furnace; and all the proud, and all that work wickedness, shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall burn them up.' What will that day do for you?

### THE HIDING-PLACE

'And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.'—ISAIAH xxxii. 2.

WE may well say, Of whom speaketh the prophet this? Here are distinctly attributed to one of ourselves, if we take the words in their simplicity and fulness, functions and powers which universal experience has taught us not to look for in humanity. And there have been a great many attempts—as it seems to me, altogether futile and baseless ones—to break the force of these words as a distinct prophecy of Jesus Christ. Surely the language is far too wide to have application to any real or ideal Jewish monarch, except one whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom? Surely the experience of a hundred centuries might teach men that there is *one* man, and one alone, who is the refuge from all dangers, the fruition of all desires, the rest and refreshment in all toils.

And I, for my part, have no hesitation in saying that the only reference of these words which gives full value to their wealth of blessing, is to regard them as a prophecy of *the* man—Christ Jesus; hiding in whom we are safe, 'coming' to whom we 'never thirst,' guarded and blest by whom no weariness can befall us, and dwelling in whom this weary world shall be full of refreshment and peace!

I do not need to point out the exquisite beauty of the imagery or the pathos and peace that breathe in the majestic rhythm of the words. There is something more than poetical beauty or rhetorical amplification of a single thought in those three clauses. The 'hiding-place' and 'covert' refer to one class of wants; the 'rivers of water in a dry place' to yet another; and 'the shadow of a great rock in a weary land' to yet a third. And, though they are tinged and dyed in Eastern imagery, the realities of life in Western lands, and in all ages, give them a deeper beauty than that of lovely imagery, and are the true keys to understanding their meaning. We shall, perhaps, best grasp the whole depth of that meaning according to the Messianic reference which we give to the text, if we consider the sad and solemn conception of man's life that underlies it; the enigmatical and obstinate hope which it holds out in the teeth of all experience—'A man shall be a refuge'; and the solution of the riddle in the man Christ Jesus.

I. First, there underlies this prophecy a very sad but a very true conception of human life.

The three classes of promises have correlative with them three phases of man's condition, three diverse aspects of his need and misery. The 'covert' and the 'hiding-place' imply tempest, storm, and danger; the 'river of water' implies drought and thirst; 'the shadow of a great rock' implies lassitude and languor, fatigue and weariness. The view of life that arises from the combination of these three bears upon its front the signature of truth in the very fact that it is a sad view.

For, I suppose, notwithstanding all that we may say concerning the beauty and the blessedness scattered

broadcast round about us; notwithstanding that we believe, and hold as for our lives the happy 'faith that all which we behold is full of blessing,' it needs but a very short experience of this life, and but a superficial examination of our own histories and our own hearts, in order to come to the conclusion that the world is full of strange and terrible sadness, that every life has dark tracts and long stretches of sombre tint, and that no representation is true to fact which dips its pencil only in light and flings no shadows on the canvas. There is no depth in a Chinese picture, because there is no shade. It is the wrinkles and marks of tear and wear that make the expression in a *man's* portrait. 'Life's sternest painter "is" its best.' The gloomy thoughts which are charged against Scripture are the true thoughts about man and the world as man has made it. Not, indeed, that life needs to be so, but that by reason of our own evil and departure from God there have come in as a disturbing element the retributive consequences of our own godlessness, and these have made danger where else were safety, thirst where else were rivers of water, and weariness and lassitude where else were strength and bounding hope.

So then, look for a moment at these three points that come out of my text, in order to lay the foundation for subsequent considerations.

We live a life defenceless and exposed to many a storm and tempest. I need but remind you of the adverse circumstances—the wild winds that go sweeping across the flat level, the biting blasts that come down from the snow-clad mountains of destiny that lie round the low plain upon which we live. I need but remind you of the dangers that are lodged for our

spiritual life in the temptations to evil that are round us. I need but remind you of that creeping and clinging consciousness of being exposed to a divinely commissioned retribution and punishment, which perverts the Name that ought to be the basis of all our blessedness into a Name unwelcome and terrible, because threatening judgment. I need but remind you how men's sins have made it needful that when the mighty God, even the Lord, appears before them, 'it shall be very tempestuous round about him.' Men fear and ought to fear 'the blast of the breath of His nostrils,' which must burn up all that is evil. And I need but remind you of that last wild wind of Death that whirls the sin-faded leaves into dark corners where they lie and rot.

My brother, you have not lived thus long without learning how defenceless you are against the storm of adverse circumstances. You have not lived thus long without learning that though, blessed be God! there do come in all our lives long periods of halcyon rest, when 'birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave,' and the heavens above are clear as sapphire, and the sea around is transparent as opal—yet the little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, may rise on the horizon, and may thicken and blacken and grow greater and nearer till all the sky is dark, and burst in lightning and rain and fierceness of wind, till 'through the torn sail the wild tempest is streaming,' and the white crests of the waves are like the mane of Death's pale horse leaping upon the broken ship. We have all learnt in how profound a sense, by reason of outward adverse circumstances and inward temptations, by reason of the fears of a Justice which we know is throned at the centre of the creation, by reason of a

death which to us is a terror, and by reason of that universal fear of 'after death the judgment,' storm and tempest swoop upon our paths. God made the sunshine, and we have made it a storm. God made life blessed and full of safety and peace, and we have wrenched ourselves from Him and stand defenceless amidst its dangers.

Then, there is another aspect and conception of life which underlies these words of my text. The image of the desert was before the prophet's rapt vision. He saw the sand whirled into mad dancing columns before the blast which swept across the unsheltered flat, with nothing, for a day's march, to check its force. But the wilderness is not only shelterless, it is waterless too—a place in which wild and ravening thirst finds no refreshing draughts, and the tongue cleaves to the blackening gums.

'Rivers of water in a dry place'; and what is the prose fact of that? That you and I live in the midst of a world which has no correspondence with, nor power of satisfying, our truest and deepest selves—that we bear about with us a whole set of longings and needs and weaknesses and strengths and capacities, all of which, like the climbing tendrils of some creeping plant, go feeling and putting out their green fingers to lay hold of some prop and stay—that man is so made that for his rest and blessedness he must have an external object round which his spirit may cling, on which his desires may fasten and rest, by which his heart may be blessed, which shall be authority for his will, peace for his fears, sprinkling and cleansing for his conscience, light for his understanding, shall be in complete correspondence with his inward nature—be water for his thirst, and bread for his hunger.



And as thus, on the very nature which each of us carries, there is stamped the signature of dependence, and the necessity of finding an external object on which to rest; and as, further, men will not be tutored even by their own miseries or by the voice of their own wants, and ever confound their wishes with their wants and their whims with their needs, therefore it comes to pass that the appetite which was only meant to direct us to God, and to be as a wholesome hunger in order to secure our partaking with relish and delight of the divine food that is provided for it, becomes unsatisfied, a torture, and unslaked, a ravening madness; and men's needs become men's misery; and men's hunger becomes men's famine; and men's thirst becomes men's death. We do dwell in a dry land where no water is.

All about us there are these creatures of God, bright and blessed and beautiful, fit for their functions and meant to minister to our gladness. They are meant to be held in subordination. It is not meant that we should find in them the food for our souls. Wealth and honour and wisdom and love and gratified ambition and successful purpose, and whatsoever other good things a man may gather about him and achieve—he may have them all, and yet in spite of them all there will be a great aching, longing vacuity in his soul. His true and inmost being will be groping through the darkness, like a plant growing in a cellar, for the light which alone can tinge its pale petals and swell its shrivelling blossoms to ripeness and fruit.

A dry place, as well as a dangerous place—have not you found it so? I believe that every soul of man has, if he will be honest with himself, and that there

is not one among us who would not, if he were to look into the deepest facts and real governing experience of his life, confess—I thirst: ‘my soul thirsteth.’ And oh, brethren, why not go on with the quotation, and make that which is else a pain, a condition of blessedness? Why not recognise the meaning of all this restless disquiet, and say ‘My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God’?

And then there is the other idea also underlying these words, yet another phase of this sad life of ours—not only danger and drought, but also weariness and languor. The desert stretches before us again, where there is no shelter from the blast and no trickling stream amid the yellowing sand; where the fierce ball above beats down cruelly, and its hot rays are flung up cruelly into our faces, and the glare blinds us, and the stifling heat wearies us, and work is a torture and motion is misery, and we long for nothing so much as to be quiet and to hide our heads in some shade.

I was reading recently one of our last books of travel in the wilderness of the Exodus, in which the writer told how, after toiling for hours under a scorching sun, over the hot, white, marly flat, seeing nothing but a beetle or two on the way, and finding no shelter anywhere from the pitiless beating of the sunshine, the weary travellers came at last to a little Retem bush only a few feet high, and flung themselves down and tried to hide, at least, their heads, from those ‘sunbeams like swords,’ even beneath its ragged shade. And my text tells of a great rock, with blue dimness in its shadow, with haply a fern or two in the moist places of its crevices, where there is rest, and a man can lie down and be cool, while

all outside is burning sun, and burning sand, and dancing mirage.

Oh! the weariness felt by us all, of plod, plod, plodding across the sand! That fatal monotony into which every man's life stiffens, as far as outward circumstances, outward joys and pleasures go! the depressing influence of custom which takes the edge off all gladness and adds a burden to every duty! the weariness of all that tugging up the hill, of all that collar-work which we have to do! Who is there that has not his mood, and that by no means the least worthy and man-like of his moods, wherein he feels, not, perhaps, that all is vanity, but—'how infinitely wearisome it all is.'

And so every race of man that ever has lived has managed out of two miseries to make a kind of shadowy gladness; and, knowing the weariness of life and the blackness of death, has somewhat lightened the latter by throwing upon it the thought of the former, and has said, 'Well, at any rate, if the grave be narrow and dark, and if outside "the warm precincts of the cheerful day" there be that ambiguous night, at least it is the place for sleep; and, if we cannot be sure of anything more, we shall rest then, at any rate.' So the hope of 'long disquiet merged in rest' becomes almost bright, and man's weariness finds most pathetic expression in his thinking of the grave as a bed where he can stretch himself and be still. Life is hard, life is dry, life is dangerous.

II. But another thought suggested by these words is—The Mysterious Hope which shines through them.

One of ourselves shall deliver us from all this evil in life. '*A man shall be a refuge, rivers of water, the shadow of a great rock.*' Such an expectation seems

to be right in the teeth of all experience, and far too high-pitched ever to be fulfilled. It appears to demand in him who should bring it to pass powers which are more than human, and which must in some inexplicable way be wide as the range of humanity and enduring as the succession of the ages.

It is worth while to realise to ourselves these two points which seem to make such words as these of our text a blank impossibility. Experience contradicts them, and common-sense demands for their fulfilment an apparently impossible human character.

All experience seems to teach—does it not?—that no human arm or heart can be to another soul what these words promise, and what we need. And yet the men who have been disappointed and disenchanted a thousand times do still look among their fellows for what their fellows, too, are looking for, and none have ever found. Have *we* found what we seek among men? Have we ever known amongst the dearest that we have clung to, one arm that was strong enough to keep us in all danger? Has there ever been a human love to which we can run with the security that *there* is a strong tower where no evil can touch us? There have been many delights in all our lives mediated and ministered to us by those that we loved. They have taught us, and helped us, and strengthened us in a thousand ways. We have received from them draughts of wisdom, of love, of joy, of guidance, of impulse, of comfort, which have been, as water in the desert is, more precious than gold. Our fellow-travellers have shared their store with us, ‘letting down their pitchers upon their hand,’ and giving us drink; but has the draught ever slaked the thirst? They carry but a pitcher, and a pitcher is not a fountain. Have

there been any in all the round of those that we have loved and trusted, to whom we have trusted absolutely, without having been disappointed? They, like us, are hemmed in by human limitations. They each bear a burdened and thirsty spirit, itself needing such supplies. And to the truest, happiest, most soul-sufficing companionship, there comes at last that dread hour which ends all sweet commerce of giving and receiving, and makes the rest of life, for some of us, one monotonous ashen-grey wilderness where no water is. These things make it impossible for us to find anywhere amongst men our refuge and our fruition.

And yet how strange, how pathetic, is the fact that after all disappointments, men still obstinately continue to look among their fellows for guidance and for light, for consolation, for defence, and for strength! After a thousand failures they still hope. Does not the search at once confess that hitherto they have not found, else why be seeking still?—and that they yet believe they will yet find, else why not cease the vain quest? And surely He who made us, made us not in vain, nor cursed us with immortal hopes which are only persistent lies. Surely there is some living Person who will vindicate these unquenchable hopes of humanity, and receive and requite our love and trust, and satisfy our longings, and explain the riddle of our lives. If there be not, nor ever has been, nor ever can be a man who shall satisfy us with his love, and defend us with his power, and be our all-sufficient satisfaction and our rest in weariness, then much of man's noblest nature is a mistake, and many of his purest and profoundest hopes are an illusion, a mockery, and a snare. The obstinate hope that, within the limits of humanity, we shall find what we

need is a mystery, except on one hypothesis, that it, too, belongs to 'the unconscious prophecies' that God has lodged in all men's hearts.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, how such functions as those of which my text speaks not only seem to be contradicted by all experience, but manifestly and obviously to transcend the possibilities of human nature. *A man* to defend me; and he himself—does *he* need no defence? A man to supply my wants; and is his spirit, then, other than mine, that it can become the all-sufficient fulness for my emptiness? He that can do this for one spirit must be greater than the spirit for which he doeth it. He that can do it for the whole race of man, through all ages, in all circumstances, down to the end of time, in every latitude, under every condition of civilisation—who must *he* be who, for the whole world, evermore and always, is their defence, their gladness, their shelter, and their rest?

The function requires a divine power, and the application of the power requires a human hand. It is not enough that I should be pointed to a far-off heaven, where there dwells an infinite loving God—I believe that we need more than that. We need both of the truths: 'God is my refuge and my strength,' and 'A man shall be a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest.'

III. That brings me to the last point to be noticed, namely:—The solution of the mystery in the person of Jesus Christ.

That which seemed impossible is real. The forebodings of humanity have not fathomed the powers of Divine Love. There *is* a man, our brother, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, who can be to single

souls the adequate object of their perfect trust, the abiding home of their deepest love, the unfailing supply for their profoundest wants. There *is* one man to whom it is wise and blessed to look as the exclusive source of all our peace, the absolute ruler of all our lives. There *is* a man in whom we find all that we have vainly sought in men. There *is* a man, who can be to all ages and to the whole race their refuge, their satisfaction, their rest. 'It behoved Him to be made in all points like unto His brethren,' that His succour might be ever near, and His sympathy sure. The man Christ Jesus who, being man, is God manifest in the flesh, exercises in one and the same act the offices of divine pity and human compassion, of divine and human guardianship, of divine and human love.

'And so the Word had breath, and wrought  
With human hands the creed of creeds  
In loveliness of perfect deeds,  
More strong than all poetic thought.'

The dreams of weary hearts that have longed for an impossible perfection are all below the reality. The fact surpasses all expectation. It is more than all prophecies, it is more than all hopes, it is more than all praise. It is God's unspeakable gift. Well might an angel voice proclaim the mystery of love, 'Unto you is *born* a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.' The ancient promise of our text is history now. A man has been and is all these things for us.

A refuge and a hiding-place from every storm—adverse circumstances sweep upon us, and His mighty hand is put down there as a buckler, behind which we may hide and be safe. Temptations to evil storm upon us, but if we are enclosed within Him they never

touch us. The fears of our own hearts swirl like a river in flood against the walls of our fortress home, and we can laugh at them, for it is founded upon a rock! The day of judgment rises before us solemn and certain, and we can await it without fear, and approach it with calm joy. I call upon no mountains and hills to cover me.

‘Rock of ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee.’

‘Rivers of water in a dry place,’—hungry and thirsty, my soul fainted within me. I longed for light, and behold darkness. I longed for help, and there was none that could come close to my spirit to succour and to give me drink in the desert. My conscience cried in all its wounds for cleansing and stanching, and no comforter nor any balm was there. My heart, weary of limited loves and mortal affections, howsoever sweet and precious, yearned and bled for one to rest upon all-sufficient and eternal. I thirsted with a thirst that was more than desire, that was pain, and was coming to be death, and I heard a voice which said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.’

‘The shadow of a great rock in a weary land,’—and my heart was weary by reason of the greatness of the way, and duties and tasks seemed toils and burdens, and I was ready to say, ‘Wherefore has Thou made me and all men in vain? Surely all this is vanity and vexation of spirit,’ and I heard One that laid His hand upon me and said, ‘Come unto Me, and I will give thee rest.’ I come to Thee, O Christ, faint and perishing, defenceless and needy, with many a sin and many a fear; to Thee I turn for Thou hast died for me, and for me Thou dost live. Be Thou my shelter and strong



tower. Give me to drink of living water. Let me rest in Thee while in this weary land, and let Thy sweet love, my Brother and my Lord, be mine all on earth and the heaven of my heaven!

## HOW TO DWELL IN THE FIRE OF GOD

‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? 15. He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.’—ISAIAH xxxiii. 14, 15.

‘He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.’—1 JOHN iv. 16.

I HAVE put these two verses together because, striking as is at first sight the contrast in their tone, they refer to the same subject, and they substantially preach the same truth. A hasty reader, who is more influenced by sound than by sense, is apt to suppose that the solemn expressions in my first text, ‘the devouring fire’ and ‘everlasting burnings,’ mean *hell*. They mean *God*, as is quite obvious from the context. The man who is to ‘dwell in the devouring fire’ is the *good* man. He that is able to abide ‘the everlasting burnings’ is ‘the man that walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly,’ that ‘despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.’ The prophet has been calling all men, far and near, to behold a great act of divine judgment in which God has been manifested in flaming glory, consuming evil; now he represents the ‘sinners in Zion,’ the unworthy members of the nation, as seized with sudden terror, and anxiously asking this question, which in effect means: ‘Who among us can abide

peacefully, joyfully, fed and brightened, not consumed and annihilated, by that flashing brightness and purity?' The prophet's answer is the answer of common-sense—like draws to like. A holy God must have holy companions.

But that is not all. The fire of God is the fire of love as well as the fire of purity; a fire that blesses and quickens, as well as a fire that destroys and consumes. So the Apostle John comes with his answer, not contradicting the other one, but deepening it, expanding it, letting us see the foundations of it, and proclaiming that as a holy God must be surrounded by holy hearts, which will open themselves to the flame as flowers to the sunshine, so a loving God must be clustered about by loving hearts, who alone can enter into deep and true friendship with Him.

The two answers, then, of these texts are one at bottom; and when Isaiah asks, 'Who shall dwell with the everlasting fire?'—the perpetual fire, burning and unconsumed, of that divine righteousness—the deepest answer, which is no stern requirement but a merciful promise, is John's answer, 'He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.'

The simplest way, I think, of bringing out the force of the words before us will be just to take these three points which I have already suggested: the world's question, the partial answer of the prophet, the complete answer of the Apostle.

#### I. The World's Question.

I need only remind you how frequently in the Old Testament the emblem of fire is employed to express the divine nature. In many places, though by no means in all, the prominent idea in the emblem is that of the purity of the divine nature, which flashes and flames

as against all which is evil and sinful. So we read in one grand passage in this book of Isaiah, 'the Light of Israel shall become a fire'; as if the lambent beauty of the highest manifestation of God gathered itself together, intensified itself, was forced back upon itself, and from merciful, illuminating light turned itself into destructive and consuming fire. And we read, you may remember, too, in the description of the symbolical manifestation of the divine nature which accompanied the giving of the Law on Sinai, that 'the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain,' and yet into that blaze and brightness the Lawgiver went, and lived and moved in it.

There is, then, in the divine nature a side of antagonism and opposition to evil, which flames against it, and labours to consume it. I would speak with all respect for the motives of many men in this day who dread to entertain the idea of the divine wrath against evil, lest they should in any manner trench upon the purity and perfectness of the divine love. I respect and sympathise with the motive altogether; and I neither respect nor sympathise with the many ferocious pictures of that which is called the wrath of God against sin, which much so-called orthodox teaching has indulged in. But if you will only remove from that word 'anger' the mere human associations which cleave to it, of passion on the one hand, and of a wish to hurt its object on the other, then you cannot, I think, deny to the divine nature the possession of such passionless and unmalignant wrath, without striking a fatal blow at the perfect purity of God. A God that does not hate evil, that does not flame out against it, using all the energies of His being to destroy it, is a God to whose character there cleaves a fatal suspicion

of indifference to good, of moral apathy. If I have not a God to trust in that hates evil because He loveth righteousness, then 'the pillared firmament itself were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble'; nor were there any hope that this damnable thing that is killing and sucking the life-blood out of our spirits should ever be destroyed and cast aside. Oh! it is short-sighted wisdom, and it is cruel kindness, to tamper with the thought of the wrath of God, the 'everlasting burnings' of that eternally pure nature wherewith it wages war against all sin.

But then, let us remember that, on the other side, the fire which is the destructive fire of perfect purity is also the fire that quickens and blesses. God is love, says John, and love is fire, too. We speak of 'the flame of love,' of 'warm affections,' and the like. The symbol of fire does not mean destructive energy only. And these two are one. God's wrath is a form of God's love; God hates because He loves.

And the 'wrath' and the 'love' differ much more in the difference of the eyes that look, than they do in themselves. Here are two bits of glass; one of them sifts out and shows all the fiery-red rays, the other all the yellow. It is the one same pure, white beam that passes through them both, but one is only capable of receiving the fiery-red beams of the wrath, and the other is capable of receiving the golden light of the love. Let us take heed lest, by destroying the wrath, we maim the love; and let us take heed lest, by exaggerating the wrath, we empty the love of its sweetness and its preciousness; and let us accept the teaching that these are one, and that the deepest of all the things that the world can know about God lies in that double saying, which does not contradict its second

half by its first, but completes its first by its second—God is Righteousness, God is Love.

Well, then, that being so, the question rises to every mind of ordinary thoughtfulness: 'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' A God fighting against evil; can you and I hope to hold familiar fellowship with Him? A God fighting against evil; if He rises up to exercise His judging and His punishing energies, can we meet Him? 'Can thy heart endure and thy hands be strong, in the day that I shall deal with thee?' is the question that comes to each of us if we are reasonable people. I do not dwell upon it; but I ask you to take it, and answer it for yourselves.

To 'dwell with everlasting burnings' means two things. First, it means to hold familiar intercourse and communion with God. The question which presents itself to thoughtful minds is—What sort of man must I be if I am to dwell near God? The lowliest bush may be lit by the divine fire and not be consumed by it; and the poorest heart may be all aflame with an indwelling God, if only it yield itself to Him, and long for His likeness. Electricity only flames into consuming fire when its swift passage is resisted. The question for us all is—How can I receive this holy fire into my bosom, and not be burned? Is any communion possible, and if it is, on what conditions? These are the questions which the heart of man is really asking, though it knows not the meaning of its own unrest.

'To dwell with everlasting burnings' means, secondly, to bear the action of the fire—the judgment of the present and the judgment of the future. The question for each of us is—How can we face that judicial and punitive action of that Divine Providence which works

even here, and how can we face the judicial and punitive action in the future?

I suppose you all believe, or at least say that you believe, that there is such a future judgment. Have you ever asked yourselves the question, and rested not until you got a reasonable answer to it, on which, like a man leaning on a pillar, you can lean the whole weight of your expectations—How am I to come into the presence of that devouring fire? Have you any fireproof dress that will enable you to go into the furnace like the Hebrew youths, and walk up and down in the midst of it, well and at liberty? Have you? ‘Who shall dwell amidst the everlasting fires?’

That question has stirred sometimes, I know, in the consciences of every man and woman that is listening to me. Some of you have tampered with it and tried to throttle it, or laughed at it and shuffled it out of your mind by the engrossments of business, and tried to get rid of it in all sorts of ways: and here it has met you again to-day. Let us have it settled, in the name of common-sense (to invoke nothing higher), once for all, upon reasonable principles that will stand; and do you see that you settle it to-day.

II. And now, look next at the prophet’s answer.

It is simple. He says that if a man is to hold fellowship with, or to face the judgment of, the pure and righteous God, the plainest dictate of reason and common-sense is that he himself must be pure and righteous to match. The details into which his answer to the question runs out are all very homely, prosaic, pedestrian kind of virtues, nothing at all out of the way, nothing that people would call splendid or heroic. Here they are:—‘He that walks righteously,’—a short injunction, easily spoken, but

how hard!—‘and speaketh uprightly, he that despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, that shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.’ Righteous action, righteous speech, inward hatred of possessions gotten at my neighbour’s cost, and a vehement resistance to all the seductions of sense, shutting one’s hands, stopping one’s ears, fastening one’s eyes up tight so that he may not handle, nor hear, nor see the evil—there is the outline of a trite, everyday sort of morality which is to mark the man who, as Isaiah says, can ‘dwell amongst the everlasting fires.’

Now, if at your leisure you will turn to Psalms xv. and xxiv., you will find there two other versions of the same questions and the same answer, both of which were obviously in our prophet’s mind when he spoke. In the one you have the question put: ‘Who shall abide in Thy tabernacle?’ In the other you have the same question put: ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?’ And both these two psalms answer the question and sketch the outline (and it is only an outline) of a righteous man, from the Old Testament point of view, substantially in the same fashion that Isaiah does here.

I do not need to remark upon the altogether unscientific and non-exhaustive nature of the description of righteousness that is set forth here. There are a great many virtues, plain and obvious, that are left out of the picture. But I ask you to notice one very special defect, as it might seem. There is not the slightest reference to anything that we call religion. It is all purely pedestrian, worldly morality; do righteous things; do not tell lies; do not cheat your

neighbour; stop your ears if people say foul things in your hearing; shut your eyes if evil comes before you. These are the kind of duties enjoined, and these only. The answer of my text moves altogether on the surface, dealing only with conduct, not with character, and dealing with conduct only in reference to this world. There is not a word about the inner nature, not a word about the inner relation of a man to God. It is the minimum of possible qualifications for dwelling with God.

Well, now, do you achieve that minimum? Suppose we waive for the moment all reference to God; suppose we waive for the moment all reference to motive and inward nature; suppose we keep ourselves only on the outside of things, and ask what sort of *conduct* a man must have that is able to walk with God? We have heard the answer.

Now, then, is that *me*? Is this sketch here, admittedly imperfect, a mere black-and-white swift outline, not intended to be shaded or coloured, or brought up to the round; is this mere outline of what a good man ought to be, at all like me? Yes or no? I think we must all say No to the question, and acknowledge our failure to attain to this homely ideal of conduct. The requirement pared down to its lowest possible degree, and kept as superficial as ever you can keep it, is still miles above me, and all I have to say when I listen to such words is, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.'

My dear friends, take this one thought away with you:—the requirements of the most moderate conscience are such as no man among us is able to comply with. And what then? Am I to be shut up to despair? am I to say: Then nobody can dwell within



that bright flame? Am I to say: Then when God meets man, man must crumble away into nothing and disappear? Am I to say, for myself: Then, alas for me! when I stand at His judgment bar?

III. Let us take the Apostle's answer.

'God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.' Now, to begin with, let us distinctly understand that the New Testament answer, represented by John's great words, entirely endorses Isaiah's; and that the difference between the two is not that the Old Testament, as represented by psalmist and prophet, said, 'You must be righteous in order to dwell with God,' and that the New Testament says, 'You need not be.' Not at all! John is just as vehement in saying that nothing but purity can bind a man in thoroughly friendly and familiar conjunction with God as David or Isaiah was. He insists as much as anybody can insist upon this great principle, that if we are to dwell with God we must be like God, and that we are like God when we are like Him in righteousness and love. 'He that saith he hath fellowship with Him, and walketh in darkness, is a liar!' That is John's short way of gathering it all up. Righteousness is as essential in the gospel scheme for all communion and fellowship with God as ever it was declared to be by the most rigid of legalists; and if any of you have the notion that Christianity has any other terms to lay down than the old terms—that righteousness is essential to communion—you do not understand Christianity. If any of you are building upon the notion that a man can come into loving and familiar friendship with God as long as he loves and cleaves to any sin, you have got hold of a delusion that will wreck your souls yet,—is, indeed, harming, wrecking

them now, and will finally destroy them if you do not get rid of it. Let us always remember that the declaration of my first text lies at the very foundation of the declaration of my second.

What, then, is the difference between them? Why, for one thing it is this—Isaiah tells us that we must be righteous, John tells us how we may be. The one says, ‘There are the conditions,’ the other says, ‘Here are the means by which you can have the conditions.’ Love is the productive germ of all righteousness; it is the fulfilling of the law. Get that into your hearts, and all these relative and personal duties will come. If the deepest, inmost life is right, all the surface of life will come right. Conduct will follow character, character will follow love.

The efforts of men to make themselves pure, and so to come into the position of holding fellowship with God, are like the wise efforts of children in their gardens. They stick in their little bits of rootless flowers, and they water them; but, being rootless, the flowers are all withered to-morrow and flung over the hedge the day after. But if we have the love of God in our hearts, we have not rootless flowers, but the seed which will spring up and bear fruit of holiness.

But that is not all. Isaiah says ‘Righteousness,’ John says ‘Love,’ which makes righteousness. And then he tells us how we may get love, having first told us how we may get righteousness: ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ It is just as impossible for a man to work himself into loving God as it is for a man to work himself into righteous actions. There is no difference in the degree of impossibility in the two cases. But what we can do is, we can go and gaze at the thing that kindles the love; we can contemplate the Cross

on which the great Lover of our souls died, and thereby we can come to love Him. John's answer goes down to the depths, for his notion of love is the response of the believing soul to the love of God which was manifested on the Cross of Calvary. To have righteousness we must have love; to have love we must look to the love that God has to us; to look rightly to the love that God has to us we must have faith. Now you have gone down to the very bottom of the matter. Faith is the first step of the ladder, and the second step is love, and the third step is righteousness.

And so the New Testament, in its highest and most blessed declarations, rests itself firmly upon these rigid requirements of the old law. You and I, dear brethren, have but one way by which we can walk in the midst of that fire, rejoicing and unconsumed, namely that we shall know and believe the love which God hath to us, love Him back again 'with pure hearts fervently,' and in the might of that receptive faith and productive love, become like Him in holiness, and ourselves be 'baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire.' Thus, fire-born and fiery, we shall dwell as in our native home, in God Himself.

### THE FORTRESS OF THE FAITHFUL

'He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks; bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure.'—ISAIAH xxxiii. 16.

THIS glowing promise becomes even more striking if we mark its connection with the solemn question in the previous context. 'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?' is the prophet's question;

‘who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?’ That question really means, Who is capable ‘of communion with God’? The prophet sketches the outline of the character in the subsequent verses, and then recurring to his metaphor of a habitation, and yet with a most lovely and significant modification, he says, ‘he’—the man that he has been sketching—‘shall dwell,’ not ‘with the everlasting burnings,’ but ‘on high; his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks,’ like some little hill, fort, or city, perched upon a mountain, and having within it ample provision and an unfailling spring of water. ‘His bread shall be given him, his water shall be sure.’ To dwell with ‘the devouring fire’ is to ‘dwell on high,’ to be safe and satisfied. So then, whilst the words before us have, of course, direct and immediate reference to the Assyrian invasion, and promise, in a literal sense, security and exemption from its evils to the righteous in Israel, they widen and deepen into a picturesque, but not less real, statement of what comes into the religious life, by communion with God. There are three things: elevation, security, satisfaction.

‘He shall dwell on high.’

In the East, and in all unsettled countries, you will find that the sites of the cities are on the hilltops, for a very plain reason, and that is the fact that underlies the prophet’s representation. To hold fellowship with God, to live in union with Him, to have His thoughts for my thoughts, and His love wrapping my heart, and His will enshrined in my will; to carry Him about with me into all the pettinesses of daily life, and, amidst the whirlpool of duties and changing circumstances, to sit in the centre, as it were the eye of the whirlpool where there is a dead calm, *that* lifts a man

on high. Communion with God secures elevation of spirit, raising us clean above the flat that lies beneath. There are many ways by which men seek for lofty thoughts, and a general elevation above the carking cares and multiplied minutenesses of this poor, mortal, transient life; but while books and great thoughts, and the converse of the wise, and art, and music, and all these other elevating influences have a real place and a blessed efficiency in ennobling life, there is not one of them, nor all of them put together, that will give to the human spirit that strange and beautiful elevation above the world and the flesh and the devil, which simple communion with God will give. I have seen many a poor man who knew nothing about the lofty visions that shape and lift humanity, who had no side of him responsive to æsthetics or art or music, who was no thinker, no student, who never had spoken to anybody above the rank of a poor labouring man, and to whom all the wisdom of the nations was a closed chamber, who yet in his life, ay! and on his face, bore marks of a spirit elevated into a serene region where there was no tumult, and where nothing unclean or vicious could live. A few of the select spirits of the race may painfully climb on high by thought and effort. Get God into your hearts, and it will be like filling the round of a silken balloon with light air; you will soar instead of climbing, and 'dwell on high.' When you are up there, the things below that look largest will dwindle and 'show,' as Shakespeare has it, 'scarce so gross as beetles,' looked at from the height, and the noises will sink to a scarcely audible murmur, and you will be able to see the lie of the country, and, as it says in the context, 'your eyes shall behold the land that is very far off.' Yes! the hilltop is the

place for wide views, and for understanding the course of the serpentine river, and it is the place to discover how small are the mightiest things at the foot, and how little a way towards the sun the noises of human praise or censure can ever travel. 'He shall dwell on high,' and he will see a long way off, and understand the relative magnitude of things, and the strife of tongues will have ceased for him.

And more than that is implied in the promise. If we dwell on high, we shall come down with all the more force on what lies below. There is no greater caricature and misconception of Christianity than that which talks as if the spirit that lived in daily communion with God, high above the world, was remote from the world. Why, how do they make electricity nowadays? By the fall of water from a height, and the higher the level from which it descends, the mightier the force which it generates in the descent. So nobody will tell on the world like the man who lives above it. The height from which a weight rushes down measures the force of its dint where it falls, and of the energy with which it comes. 'He shall dwell on high'; and only the man that stands above the world is able to influence it.

Again, here is another blessing of the Christian life, put in a picturesque form: 'His defence shall be munitions of rocks.' That is a promise of security from assailants, which in its essence is true always, though its truth may seem doubtful to the superficial estimate of sense. The experience of the South African war showed how impregnable 'the munitions of rocks' were. The Boers lay safe behind them, and our soldiers might fire lyddite at them all day and never touch them. So, the man who lives in

communion with God has between him and all evil the Rock of Ages, and he lies at the back of it, quiet and safe, whatever foe may rage on the other side of it.

Now, of course, the prophet meant to tell his countrymen that, in the theocracy of which they were parts, righteousness and nothing else was the national security, and if a man or a nation lived in communion with God, it bore a charmed life. That is a great deal more true, in regard to externals, in the miraculous 'dispensation,' as it is called, of the Old Testament than it is now, and we are not to take over these promises in their gross literal form into the Christian era, as if they were unconditional and absolutely to be fulfilled. But at the same time, if you reflect how many of our troubles do come to us mainly because we break our communion with God, I think we shall see that this old word has still an application to our daily lives and outward circumstances. Deduct from any man's life all the discomfort and trouble and calamity which have come down upon him because he was not in touch with God, and there will not be very much left. Yet there will be some, and the deepest and sorest of all our sorrows are not to be interpreted as occasioned by defects in our dwelling in God. Then has my text no application to them? Yes, because what still remains of earthly cares and sorrows and evils would, in communion with God, change its character. The rind is the same; but all the interior contents have been, as children will do with a fruit, scooped out, and another kind of thing has been put inside, so that though the outward appearance is the same, what is at the heart of it is utterly different. It is no longer some coarse, palate-biting, common vegetable, but a sweet confection, made by God's own hands, and put into the

gourd, which has been hollowed out and emptied of its evil. That is, perhaps, a very violent figure, but take a plain case as illustration. Suppose two men, each of them going to his wife's funeral. The two hearses pass inside the cemetery gates, one after the other. Outwardly the two afflictions are the same, but the one man says, 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away'; the other man says, 'They have taken away my gods, and what shall I do more?' *Are the two things the same?* 'He shall dwell on high, his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks,' and if we do hide ourselves in the cleft, then no evil shall befall us, nor any plague come nigh our dwelling.

But there is another truth contained in this great promise, viz., that in regard to all the real evils which beset men, and these are all summed up in the one, the temptation to do wrong, their arrows will be blunted, and their force be broken, if we keep our minds in touch with God through humble communion and lowly obedience. Dear brethren, the way by which we can conquer temptations around, and silence inclinations within which riotously seek to yield to the temptations is, I believe, far more by cultivating a consciousness of communion with God, than by specific efforts directed to the overcoming of a given and particular temptation. Keep inside the fortress, and no bullet will come near you. Array yourselves in the most elaborate precautions and step out from its shadow, and every bullet will strike and wound. Let me keep up my fellowship with God, and I may laugh at temptation. Security depends on continual communion with God by faith, love, aspiration, and obedience.

Now, I need not say more than a word about the last element in these promises, the satisfaction of desires.



‘His bread shall be given him, and his water shall be sure.’ In ancient warfare sieges were usually blockades; and strong fortresses were reduced by famine much more frequently than by assault. Mafeking and Ladysmith and Port Arthur were in most danger from that cause. The promise here assures us that we shall have all supplies in our abode, if God is our abode. Wherever he who dwells in God goes, he carries with him his provisions, and he does not need elaborate arrangements of pipes or reservoirs, because there is a fountain in the courtyard that the enemy cannot get at. They may stop the springs throughout the land, they may cut off all water supplies, so that ‘there shall be no fruit in the vine, and the labour of the olive shall fail,’ but they cannot touch the fountain. ‘His water shall be sure,’ and he can say, ‘In the days of famine I shall be satisfied.’

God is and gives all that we need for sustenance, for growth, for refreshment, for satisfaction of our desires. Keep near Him, and you will find in the heart of the devouring fire a shelter, and you will have all that you want for life here. My text will be true about us, in the measure in which we do thus dwell, and if we thus dwell here, and so dwell on high, with the munitions of rocks for our fortress, and ‘the bread of God that came down from heaven’ for our food, and the water of life for our refreshment, then, when there is no longer any need of places for defence, the other saying will be true, ‘They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them . . . and shall lead them to living fountains of waters, and God, the Lord, shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.’

## THE RIVERS OF GOD

‘But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.’—ISAIAH xxxiii. 21.

ONE great peculiarity of Jerusalem, which distinguishes it from almost all other historical cities, is that it has no river. Babylon was on the Euphrates, Nineveh on the Tigris, Thebes on the Nile, Rome on the Tiber; but Jerusalem had nothing but a fountain or two, and a well or two, and a little trickle and an intermittent stream. The water supply to-day is, and always has been, a great difficulty, and an insuperable barrier to the city's ever having a great population.

That deficiency throws a great deal of beautiful light on more than one passage in the Old Testament. For instance, this same prophet contrasts the living stream, the waters of Siloam, as an emblem of the gentle sway of the divine King of Israel, with ‘the river, strong and mighty,’ which was the symbol of Assyria; and a psalm that we all know well, sings, ‘There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God,’—a triumphant exclamation which is robbed of half its force, unless we remember that the literal Jerusalem had no river at all. The vision of living waters flowing from the Temple which Ezekiel saw is a variation of the same theme, and suggests that in the Messianic days the deficiency shall be made good, and a mysterious stream shall spring up from behind, and flow out from beneath, the temple doors, and then with rapid increase and depth and width, but with no tributaries coming into it, shall run fertilising and life-giving everywhere, till it pours

itself into the noisome waters of the sullen sea of death and heals even them.

The same general representation is contained in the words before us. Isaiah's great vision is not, as I take it, of a future, but of what the Jerusalem of his day might be to the Israelite if he would live by faith. The mighty Lord, 'the glorious Lord,' shall Himself 'be a place of broad rivers and streams.'

I. First, then, this remarkable promise suggests to me how in God there is the supply of all deficiencies.

The city was perched on its barren, hot rock, with scarcely a drop of water, and its inhabitants must often have been tempted to wish that there had been running down the sun-bleached bed of the Kedron a flashing stream, such as laved the rock-cut temples and tombs of Thebes. Isaiah says, in effect, 'You cannot see it, but if you will trust yourselves to God, there will be such a river.'

In like manner every defect in our circumstances, everything lacking in our lives—and we all have something which does not correspond with, or which falls beneath, our wishes and apparent needs—everything which seems to hamper us in some aspects, and to sadden us in others, may be compensated and made up if we will hold fast by God; and although to outward sense we dwell 'in a dry and barren land where no water is,' the eye of faith will see, flashing and flowing all around, the rejoicing waters of the divine presence, and they will mirror the sky, and the reflections will teach us that there is a heaven above us.

If there is in any life a gap, that is a prophecy that God will fill it. If there is anything in your circumstances in regard to which you often feel sadly, and

are sometimes tempted to feel bitterly, how much stronger and more fully equipped you would be, if it were otherwise, be sure that in God there is that which can supply the want, and that the consciousness of the want is a merciful summons to seek its supply from and in Him. If there is a breach in the encircling wall of your defences, God has made it in order that He Himself, and not an enemy, may enter your lives and hearts. 'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne,' and it did not matter though that mortal king was dead, for the true King was thereby revealed as living for ever, just as when the summer foliage, fluttering and green, drops from the tree, the sturdy stem and the strong branches are made the more visible. Our felt deficiencies are doors by which God may come in. Do you sometimes feel as if you would be better if you had easier worldly circumstances? Is your health precarious and feeble? Have you to walk a solitary path through this world, and does your heart often ache for companionship? You can have all your heart's desire fulfilled in deepest reality in God, in the same way that that riverless city had Jehovah for 'a place of broad rivers and streams.'

II. Take another side of the same thought. Here is a revelation of God and His sweet presence as our true defence.

The river that lay between some strong city and the advancing enemy was its strongest fortification when the bridge of boats was taken away. One of the ancient cities to which I have referred is described by one of the prophets as being held as within the coils of a serpent, by which he means the various bendings and twistings of the Euphrates, which encompassed Babylon, and made it so hard to be conquered. The

primitive city of Paris owed its safety in the wild old times when it was founded, to its being on an island. Venice has lived through many centuries, because it is girded about by its lagoons. England is what it is, largely because of 'the streak of silver sea.' So God's city has a broad moat all round it. The prophet goes on to explain the force of his bold figure in regard to the safety promised by it, when he says: 'Wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.' Not a keel of the enemy shall dare to cut its waters, nor break their surface with the wet splash of invading oars. And so, if we will only knit ourselves with God by simple trust and continual communion, it is the plainest prose fact that nothing will harm us, and no foe will ever get near enough to us to shoot his arrows against us.

That is a truth for faith, and not for sense. Many a man, truly compassed about by God, has to go through fiery trial and sorrow and affliction. But I venture to appeal to every heart that has known grief most acutely, protractedly, and frequently, and has borne it in the faith of God, and with submission to Him; and I know that they who are the 'experts,' and who alone have the right to speak with authority on the subject, will confirm the statement that I make, that sorrows recognised as sent from God are the truest blessings of our lives. No real evil befalls us, because, according to the old superstition that money bewitched was cleansed if it was handed across running water, our sorrows only reach us across the river that defends.

Isaiah is full of symbols of various kinds for the impregnability of Zion. Sometimes, as in my text, he falls back upon the thought of the bright waters of

the moat on which no enemy can venture to sail. Sometimes he draws his metaphor from the element opposed to water, and speaks of a wall of fire round about us. But the simple reality that lies below all the poetry is, that trust in God brings His presence around me, and that makes it impossible that any evil should befall me, and certain that whatever does befall me is His messenger, His loving messenger, for my good. If we believed that, and lived on the belief, the whole world would be different.

III. Take, again, another aspect of this same thought, which suggests to us God's presence as our true refreshment and satisfaction.

The waterless city depended on cisterns, and they were often broken, and were always more or less foul, and sometimes the water fell very low in them. Isaiah says to us: Even when you are living in external circumstances like that:

‘When all created streams are dry,  
Thy fulness is the same.’

The fountain of living waters—if we may slightly vary the metaphor of my text—never sinks one hair's-breadth in its crystal basin, however many thirsty lips may be glued to its edge, and however large may be their draughts from it. This metaphor, turned to the purpose of suggesting how in God every part of our nature finds its appropriate nourishment and refreshment which it does not find anywhere besides, has become one of the commonplaces of the pulpit. Would it were the commonplace of our lives! It is easy to talk about Him as being the fountain of living waters; it is easy to quote and to admire the words which the Master spoke to the Samaritan

woman when He said, 'I would have given thee living water,' and 'the water which I give will be a fountain springing up into everlasting life.' We repeat or learn such sayings, and then what do we do? We go away and try to slake our thirst at broken cisterns, and every draught which we take is like the salt water from which a shipwrecked-boat's crew in its madness will sometimes not be able to refrain, each drop increasing the raging thirst and hastening the impending death.

If we believed that God was the broad river from which we could draw and draw, and drink and drink, for ever and ever, should we be clinging with such desperate tenacity, as most of us exhibit, to earthly goods? Should we whimper with such childish regrets, as most of us nourish, when these goods are diminished or withdrawn? Should we live as we constantly do, day in and day out, seldom applying ourselves to the one source of strength and peace and refreshment, and trying, like fools, to find what apart from Him the world can never give? The rivers in northern Tartary all lose themselves in the sand. Not one of them has volume or force enough to get to the sea. And the rivers from which we try to drink are sand-choked long before our thirst is slaked. So, if we are wise, we shall take Isaiah's hint, and go where the water flows abundantly, and flows for ever.

IV. There is a last point that I would also suggest, namely, the manifold variety in the results of God's presence.

It shapes itself into many forms, according to our different needs. 'The glorious Lord shall be a place of broad rivers.' Yes; but notice the next words—

‘and streams.’ Now, the word which is there translated ‘streams’ means little channels for irrigation and other purposes, by which the water of some great river is led off into the melon patches, and gardens, and plantations, and houses of the inhabitants. So we have not only the picture of the broad river in its unity, but also that of the thousand little rivulets in their multiplicity, and in their direction to each man’s plot of ground. It is the same idea that is in the psalm which I have already quoted: ‘There is a river, *the streams* whereof make glad the city of our God.’ You can divide the river up into very tiny trickles, according to the moment’s small wants. If you make but a narrow channel, you will get but a shallow streamlet; and if you make your channel broad and deep, you will get much of Him.

It is of no profit that we live on the river’s bank if we let its waters go rolling and flashing past our door, or our gardens, or our lips. Unless you have a sluice, by which you can take them off into your own territory, and keep the shining blessing to be the source of fertility in your own garden, and of coolness and refreshment to your own thirst, your garden will be parched, and your lips will crack. There is a ‘broad river,’ and there are also ‘streams’; which, being brought down to its simplest expression, just comes to this—that we may and must make God our very own property. It is useless to say ‘*our* God,’ ‘the God of Israel,’ ‘the God of the Church,’ ‘the Great Creator,’ ‘the Universal Father,’ and so on, unless we say ‘*my* God and *my* Saviour,’ ‘*my* Refuge and *my* Strength.’ How much of the river have you dipped up in your own vessel? How much of it have you taken with which



to water your own vineyard and refresh your own souls?

The time comes when Isaiah's prophecy shall be perfectly fulfilled, according to the great words in the closing book of Scripture, about the river of the water of life proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb. But, till that time comes, we do not need to wander thirsty in a desert; but all round us we may hear the mighty waters rolling everywhere, and drink deep draughts of delight and supply for all our needs, from the very presence of God Himself.

## JUDGE, LAWGIVER, KING

'For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King; He will save us.'—ISAIAH xxxiii. 22.

THERE is reference here to the three forms of government in Israel: by Moses, by Judges, by Kings. In all, Israel was a Theocracy. Isaiah looks beyond the human representative to the true divine Reality.

I. A truth for us, in both its more specific and its more general forms.

(a) Specific. Christ is all these three for us—Authority; His will law; Defender.

(b) More general. Everything that human beings are to us, they are by derivation from Him—and He sums in Himself all forms of good and blessing. Every name among men for any kind of helper belongs to Him. All tender, helpful relationships are but 'broken lights of Thee.'

II. A lesson hard to learn and to remember.

One knows not whether it is harder for faith to look beyond the visible helpers or delights to the Unseen

Real One, or to look through tears, when these are gone, and to see Him clearly filling an otherwise empty field of vision. When we have a palpable prop to lean on, it is difficult to be clearly aware that, unless the palpable support were held up by the Unseen, it could not be a prop, and to lean on it would be like resting one's weight on a staff stuck in yielding mud. But it is no less difficult to tell our hearts that we have all that we ever had, when what we had leaned on for many happy days and found to hold us up is stricken from beneath us. Present, the seen lawgiver, judge, or king stays the eyes that should travel past him to God Himself; removed, his absence makes a great emptiness, in whose vacuity it is difficult for faith to discern the real presence of Him who is all that the departed seemed to be. The painted glass stays the eye; shattered, it lets in only the sight of a void and far-off sky.

Israel could not breathe freely in the rarefied air on the heights of a theocracy, and demanded a visible king. It had its desire, and as a consequence, 'lean-ness in its soul.' Christendom has found it as difficult to do without visible embodiments of authority, law, defence, and hence many evils and corruptions in the institutions and practices of organised Christianity.

### III. A conviction which makes strong and blessed.

To have dominant in our minds, and operative through our lives, the settled conviction that God in Christ is for us judge, lawgiver, and king, and that the purpose of all these offices or relationships is that 'He will save us' is the secret of tranquillity, the fountain of courage, the talisman which makes life all different and us who live in it different. Fear cannot survive where that conviction rules and forti-

fies a heart. We shall not be slavish adherents of men if we are accustomed to take our orders from our Lawgiver. Earthly prizes or dignities will not dazzle eyes that have seen the King in His beauty. We shall pay little heed to men's judgments if there flames ever before conscience the thought, 'He that judgeth me is the Lord.' 'He will save us'; who can destroy what His hand is stretched out to preserve? 'If God is for us, who is against us? It is God that justifieth; who is He that condemneth?'

### MIRACLES OF HEALING

'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.'—ISAIAH xxxv. 5, 6.

'THEN'—when? The previous verse answers, 'Behold, your God will come, He will come and save you.' And what or when is that 'coming'? A glance at the place which this grand hymn occupies in the series of Isaiah's prophecies answers that question. It stands at the close of the first part of these, and is the limit of the prophet's vision. He has been setting forth the Lord's judgments upon all heathen, and His deliverance of Israel from its oppressors; and the 'coming' is His manifestation for that double purpose. Before its flashing brightness, barrenness is changed into verdure, diseases that lame men's powers vanish, the dry and thirsty land gleams with the shining light of sudden streams. Across the wilderness stretches a broad path, raised high above the bewildering monotony of pathless sand, too plain to be missed, too lofty for wild beasts' suppleness to spring upon it: along it troop with song and gladness the returning

exiles, with hope in their hearts as they journey to Zion, where they find a joyful home undimmed by sorrow, and in which sighing and sorrow are heard and felt no more.

Now this is poetry, no doubt; the golden light of imagination suffuses it all, but it is poetry with a solid meaning in it. It is not a mere play of fancy exalting the 'coming of the Lord' by heaping together all images that suggest the vanishing of evil and the coming of good. If there is a basis of facts in it, what are they? What is the period of that emphatic 'then' at the beginning of our text? The return of the Jews from exile? Yes, certainly; but some greater event shines through the words. Some future restoration of that undying race to their own land? Yes, possibly, again we answer, but that does not exhaust the prophecy. The great coming of God to save in the gift of His Son? Yes, that in an eminent degree. The second coming of Christ? Yes, that too. All the events in which God has come for men's deliverance are shadowed here; for in them all, the same principles are at work, and in all, similar effects have followed. But mainly the mission and work of Jesus Christ is pointed at here—whether in its first stage of Incarnation and Passion, or in its second stage of Coming in glory, 'the second time without sin, unto salvation.'

And the bodily diseases here enumerated are symbols, just as Christ's miracles were symbolical, just as every language has used the body as a parable of the soul, and has felt that there is such a harmony between them that the outward and visible does correspond to and shadow the inward and spiritual.

I think, then, that we may fairly take these four

promises as bringing out very distinctly the main characteristics of the blessed effects of Christ's work in the world. The great subject of these words is the power of Christ in restoring to men the spiritual capacities which are all but destroyed. We have here three classes of bodily infirmities represented as cured at the date of that blessed 'Then.' Blindness and deafness are defects in perception, and stand for incapacities affecting the powers of knowledge. Lameness affects powers of motion, and stands for incapacity of activity. Dumbness prevents speech, and stands for incapacity of utterance.

I. Christ as the restorer of the powers of knowing.

Bodily diseases are taken to symbolise spiritual infirmities.

Mark the peculiarities of Scripture anthropology as brought out in this view of humanity:—

Its gloomy views of man's actual condition.

Its emphatic declaration that that condition is abnormal.

Its confidence of effecting a cure.

Its transcendently glorious conception of what man may become.

Men are blind and deaf; that is to say, their powers of perception are destroyed by reason of disease. What a picture! The great spiritual realities are all unseen, as Elisha's young servant was blind to the fiery chariots that girdled the prophet. Men are blind to the starry truths that shine as silver in the firmament. They are deaf to the Voice which is gone out to the ends of the earth, and yet they have eyes and ears, conscience, intuitions. They possess organs, but these are powerless.

And while the blindness is primarily in regard to

spiritual and religious truths, it is not confined to these, but wherever spiritual blindness has fallen, the whole of a man's knowledge will suffer. There will be blindness to the highest philosophy, to the true basis and motive of morals, to true psychology, to the noblest poetry. All will be of the earth, earthy. You cannot strike religion out of men's thoughts, as you might take a stone out of a wall and leave the wall standing; you take out foundation and mortar, and make a ruinous heap.

I know, of course, that there may be much mental activity without any perception of spiritual realities, but all knowledge which is not purely mathematical or physical suffers by the absence of such perception. All this blindness is caused by sin.

Christ is the giver of spiritual sight. He restores the faculty by taking away the hindrance to its exercise. Further, He gives sight because He gives light.

But turn to facts of experience, and consider the mental apathy of heathenism as contrasted with the energy of mind within the limits of Christendom. Greece, of course, is a brilliant exception, but even there (1) what of the conceptions of God? (2) what of the effect of the wise on the mass of the nation? Think of the languid intellectual life of the East. Think of the energy of thought which has been working within the limits of Christianity. Think of Christian theology compared with the mythologies of idolatry. And the contrast holds not only in the religious field but all over the field of thought.

There is no such sure way of diffusing a culture which will refine and strengthen all the powers of mind as to diffuse the knowledge of Jesus, and to make men love Him. In His light they will see light.

To know Him and to keep company with Him is 'a liberal education,' as is seen in many a lowly life, all uninfluenced by what is called learning, but enriched with the finest flowers of 'culture,' and having gathered them all in Christ's garden.

Christ is the true light; in Him do we see. Without Him, what is all other knowledge? He is central to all, like genial heat about the roots of a plant. There is other knowledge than that of sense; and for the highest of all our knowledge we depend on Him who is the Word. In that region we can neither observe nor experiment. In that region facts must be brought by some other means than we can command, and we can but draw more or less accurate deductions from them. Logic without revelation is like a spinning-machine without any cotton, busy drawing out nothing. Here we have to listen. 'The entrance of Thy words giveth light.' Your God shall come and save you; then, by that divine coming and saving, 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.'

## II. Christ as the Restorer of the Powers of Action.

Again turn to heathenism, see the apathetic indolence, the unprogressive torpor. 'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.' Sin lames for service of God; it leaves the lower nature free to act, and that freedom paralyses all noble activity.

Christianity brings the Energising of the Soul—

(a) By its reference of everything to God—our powers and our circumstances and our activities.

(b) By its prominence given to Retribution. It speaks not merely of *vita brevis*—but of *vita brevis* and an Eternity which grows out of it.

(c) By its great motive for work—love.

(d) By the freedom it brings from the weight that paralysed.

It takes away sin. Lifting that dreary load from our backs, it makes us joyful, strong, and agile.

The true view of Christianity is not, as some of its friends, and some of its foes, mistakenly concur in supposing, that it weakens interest in, and energy on, the Present, but that it heightens the power of action. A life plunged in that jar of oxygen will glow with redoubled brilliance.

III. Christ as the Restorer of Powers of Utterance.

The silence that broods over the world. It is dumb for all holy, thankful words; with no voice to sing, no utterance of joyful praise.

Think of the effect of Christianity on human speech, giving it new themes, refining words and crowding them with new meanings. Translate the Bible into any language, and that language is elevated and enriched.

Think of the effect on human praise. That great treasure of Christian poetry.

Think of the effect on human gladness. Christ fills the heart with such reasons for praise, and makes life one song of joy.

Thus Christ is the Healer.

To men seeking for knowledge, He offers a higher gift—healing. And as for true knowledge and culture, in Christ, and in Christ alone, will you find it.

Let your culture be rooted in Him. Let your Religion influence all your nature.

The effects of Christianity are its best evidence. What else does the like of that which it does? Let Jannes and Jambres 'do the same with their enchantments.' We may answer the question, 'Art Thou He



that should come?' as Christ did, 'The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.'

The perfect Restoration will be in heaven. Then, indeed, when our souls are freed from mortal grossness, and the thin veils of sense are rent and we behold Him as He is, then when they rest not day nor night, but with ever renewed strength run to His commandments, then when He has put into their lips a new song—'then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf be unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.'

## MIRAGE OR LAKE

'For in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the glowing sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.'

ISAIAH XXXV. 6, 7.

WHAT a picture is painted in these verses! The dreary wilderness stretches before us, monotonous, treeless, in some parts bearing a scanty vegetation which flourishes in early spring and dies before fierce summer heats, but for the most part utterly desolate, the sand blinding the eyes, the ground cracked and gaping as if athirst for the rain that will not fall; over it the tantalising mirage dancing in mockery, and amid the hot sand the yelp of the jackals. What does this dead land want? One thing alone—water. Could that be poured upon it, all would be changed; nothing else will do any good. And it comes. Suddenly it bursts from the sand, and streams bring life along the desert. It gathers into placid lakes, with their whispering reeds and nodding rushes, and the thick cool grass round

their margins. The foul beasts that wandered through dry places seeking rest are drowned out. So full of blessed change will be the coming of the Lord, of which all this context speaks. Mark that this burst of waters is when 'the Lord shall come,' and that it is the reason for the restoration of lost powers in men, and especially for a chorus of praise from dumb lips. This, then, is the central blessing. It is not merely a joyful transformation, but it is the reason for a yet more joyful transformation (chap. xliv. 3). Recall Christ's words to the Samaritan woman and in the Temple on the great day of the Feast.

Then this is pre-eminently a description of the work of Christ.

I. Christ brings the Supernatural Communication of a New Life.

We may fairly regard this metaphor as setting forth the very deepest characteristic of the gospel. Consider man's need, as typified in the image of the desert. Mark that the supply for that need must come from without; that coming from without, it must be lodged in the heart of the race; that the supernatural communication of a new life and power is the very essence of the work of Christ; that such a communication is the only thing adequate to produce these wondrous effects.

II. This new life slakes men's thirst.

The pangs and tortures of the waterless wilderness. The thirst of human souls; they long, whether they know it or not, for—

Truth for Understanding.

Love for Heart.

Basis and Guidance for Will and Effort.

Cleansing for Conscience.

Adequate objects for their powers.

They need that all these should be in One.

The gnawing pain of our thirst is not a myth; it is the secret of man's restlessness. We are ever on the march, not only because change is the law of the world, nor only because effort and progress are the law for civilised men, but because, like caravans in the desert, we have to search for water.

In Christ it is slaked; all is found there.

III. The Communication of this New Life turns Illusions into Realities.

'The mirage shall become a pool.' Life without Christ is but a long illusion. 'Sin makes a mock of fools.' How seldom are hopes fulfilled, and how still less frequently are they, when fulfilled, as good as we painted them! The prismatic splendours of the rainbow, which gleam before us and which we toil to catch, are but grey rain-drops when caught. Joys attract and, attained, have incompleteness and a tang of bitterness. The fish is never so heavy when landed on the sward as it felt when struggling on our hook. 'All is vanity'—yes, if creatures and things temporal are pursued as our good. But nothing is vanity, if we have the life in us which Jesus comes to give. His Gospel gives solid, unmingled joys, sure promises which are greater when fulfilled than when longed for, certain hopes whose most brilliant colours are duller than those of the realities. The half has not been told of the 'things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.'

Sure Promises.

A certain Hope.

IV. This New Life gives Fruitfulness.

It stimulates all our nature. A godless life is in a very tragic sense barren, and a wilderness. There is

in it nothing really worth doing, nor anything that will last. Christ gives Power, Motive, Pattern, and makes a life of holy activity possible. The works done by men apart from Him are, if measured by the whole relations and capacities of the doers, unfruitful works, however they may seem laden with ruddy clusters. It is only lives into which that river of God which is full of water flows that bring forth fruit, and whose fruit remains. The desert irrigated becomes a garden of the Lord.

Note, too, how this river drowns out wild beasts. The true way of conquering evil is to turn the river into it. Cultivate, and weeds die. The expulsive power of a new affection is the most potent instrument for perfecting character.

What is the use of water if we do not drink? We may perish with thirst even on the river's bank. 'If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink.'

### THE KING'S HIGHWAY

'And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the way-faring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there.'—ISAIAH XXXV. 8, 9.

WE can fancy what it is to be lost in a forest where a traveller may ride round in a circle, thinking he is advancing, till he dies. But it is as easy to be lost in a wilderness, where there is nothing to see, as in a wood where one can see nothing. And there is something even more ghastly in being lost below the broad heavens in the open face of day than 'in the close covert of innumerable boughs.' The monotonous swells of the

sand-heaps, the weary expanse stretching right away to the horizon, no land-marks but the bleaching bones of former victims, the gigantic sameness, the useless light streaming down, and in the centre one tiny, black speck toiling vainly, rushing madly hither and thither—a lost man—till he desperately flings himself down and lets death bury him, that is the one picture suggested by the text. The other is of that same wilderness, but across it a mighty king has flung up a broad, lofty embankment, a highway raised above the sands, cutting across them so conspicuously that even an idiot could not help seeing it, so high above the land around that the lion's spring falls far beneath it, and the supple tiger skulks baffled at its base. It is like one of those roads which the terrible energy of conquering Rome carried straight as an arrow from the milestone in the Forum over mountains, across rivers and deserts, morasses and forests, to flash along them the lightning of her legions, and over whose solid blocks we travel to-day in many a land.

The prophet has seen in his vision the blind and deaf cured, the capacities of human nature destroyed by sin restored. He has told us that this miraculous change has come from the opening of a spring of new life in the midst of man's thirsty desert, and now he sets before us, in yet another image, another aspect of the glorious change which is to follow that coming of the Lord to save, which filled the farthest horizon of his vision. The desert shall have a plain path on which those diseased men who have been healed journey. Life shall no longer be trackless, but God will, by His coming, prepare paths that we should walk in them; and as He has given the lame man power to walk, so will he also provide the way by

which His happy pilgrims will journey to their home.

I. The pathless wandering of godless lives.

The old, old comparison of life to a journey is very natural and very pathetic. It expresses life's ceaseless change; every day carries us into a new scene, every day the bends of the road shut out some happy valley where we fain would have rested, every day brings new faces, new associations, new difficulties, and even if the same recur, yet it is with such changes that they are substantially new, and of each day's march it is true, even when life is most monotonous, that 'ye have not passed this way heretofore.' It expresses life's ceaseless effort and constant plodding. To-day's march does not secure to-morrow's rest, but, however foot-sore and weary, we have to move on, like some child dragged along by a careless nurse. It expresses the awful crumbling away of life beneath us. The road has an end, and each step takes us nearer to it. The numbers that face us on the milestones slowly and surely decrease; we pass the last and on we go, tramp, tramp, and we cannot stop till we reach the narrow chamber, cold and dark, where, at any rate, we have got the long march over.

But to many men, the journey of life is one which has no definite direction deliberately chosen, which has no all-inclusive aim, which has no steady progress. There may be much running hither and thither, but it is as aimless as the marchings of a fly upon a window, as busy and yet as uncertain as that of the ants who bustle about on an ant-hill.

Now that is the idea, which our text implies, of all the activity of a godless life, that it is not a steady advance to a chosen goal, but a rushing up and down

in a trackless desert, with many immense exertions all thrown away. Then, in contrast, it puts this great thought: that God has come to us and made for us a path for our feet.

## II. The highway that God casts up.

Of course that coming we take to be Christ's coming, and we have just to consider the manner in which His coming fulfils this great promise, and has made in the trackless wilderness a way for us to walk in.

1. Christ gives us a Definite Aim for Life. I know, of course, that men may have this apart from Him, definite enough in all conscience. But such aims are unworthy of men's whole capacities. Not one of them is fit to be made the exclusive, all-embracing purpose of a life, and, taken together, they are so multifarious that in their diversity they come to be equal to none. How many we have all had! Most of us are like men who zig-zag about, chasing after butterflies! Nor are any such aims certain to be reached during life, and they all are certain to be lost at death.

Godless men are enticed on like some dumb creature lured to slaughter-house by a bunch of fodder—once inside, down comes the pole-axe.

But Christ gives us a definite aim which is worthy of a man, which includes all others; which binds this life and the next into one.

2. Christ gives us distinct knowledge of whither we should go. It is not enough to give general directions; we need to know what our next step is to be. It is of no avail that we see the shining turrets far off on the hill, if all the valleys between are unknown and trackless. Well: we have Him to point us our course. He is the exemplar—the true ideal of human nature. Hour by hour His pattern fits to our lives. True, we

shall often be in perplexity, but that perplexity will clear itself by patient thought, by holding our wills in suspense till He speaks, and by an honest wish to go right. There will no longer be doubt as to what is our law, though there may be as to the application of it. We are not to be guided by men's maxims, nor by the standards and patterns round us, but by Him.

3. Christ gives means by which we can reach the aim. He does so by supplying a stimulus to our activity, in the motive of His love; by the removal of the hindrances arising from sin, through His redeeming work; by the gifts of new life from His Spirit.

'The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.' But he that follows Jesus treads the right way to the city of habitation.

4. Christ goes with us. The obscure words, 'It shall be for those' are by some rendered, 'He shall be with them,' and we may take them so, as referring to the presence with His happy pilgrims of the Lord Himself. Perhaps Isaiah may have been casting back a thought to the desert march, where the pillar led the host. But at all events we have the same companion to 'talk with us by the way,' and make 'our hearts burn within us,' as had the two disconsolate pedestrians on the road to Emmaus. It is Jesus who goes before us, whether He leads us to green pastures and waters of quietness or through valleys of the shadow of death, and we can be smitten by no evil, since He is with us.

### III. The travellers upon God's highway.

Two conditions are laid down in the text. One is negative—the unclean can find no footing there. It is 'the way of holiness,' not only because holiness is in some sense the goal to which it leads, but still more,



because only holy feet can tread it, holy at least in the travellers' aspiration and inward consecration, though still needing to be washed daily. One is positive—it is 'the simple' who shall not err therein. They who distrust themselves and their own skill to find or force a path through life's jungle, and trust themselves to higher guidance, are they whose feet will be kept in the way.

No lion or ravenous beast can spring or creep up thereon. Simple keeping on Christ's highway elevates us above temptations and evils of all sorts, whether nightly prowlers or daylight foes.

This generation is boasting or complaining that old landmarks are blotted out, ancient paths broken, footmarks obliterated, stars hid, and mist shrouding the desert. But Christ still guides, and His promise still holds good: 'He that followeth Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life.' The alternative for each 'traveller between life and death' is to tread in His footsteps or to 'wander in the wilderness in a solitary way, hungry and thirsty,' with fainting soul. Let us make the ancient prayer ours: 'See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

### WHAT LIFE'S JOURNEY MAY BE

'The redeemed shall walk there: And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.'—ISAIAH XXXV 9, 10.

WE have here the closing words of Isaiah's prophecy. It has been steadily rising, and now it has reached the summit. Men restored to all their powers, a supernatural communication of a new life, a pathway for

our journey—these have been the visions of the preceding verses, and now the prophet sees the happy pilgrims flocking along the raised way, and hears some faint strains of their glad music, and he marks them, rank after rank, entering the city of their solemnities, and through the gates can behold them invested with joy and gladness, while sorrow and sighing, like some night-loving birds shrinking from the blaze of that better sun which lights the city, spread their black wings and flee away.

The noble rhythm of our English version rises here to a strain of pathetic music, the very cadence of which stirs thoughts that lie too deep for tears, and one shrinks from taking these lofty words of immortal hope—which life's sorrows have interpreted, I trust, for many of us—as the text of a sermon. But I would fain try whether some of their gracious sweetness and power may not survive even our rude handling of them.

The prophet here is not only speaking of the literal return of his brethren from captivity. The place which this prophecy holds at the very close of the book, the noble loftiness of the language, the entire absence of any details or specific allusions which compel reference to the Captivity, would be sufficient of themselves to make us suspect that there was very much more here. The structure of prophecy is misunderstood unless it be recognised that all the history of Israel was itself a prediction, a great supernatural system of types and shadows, and that all the interventions of the divine hand are one in principle, and all foretell the great intervention of redeeming love, in the person of Jesus Christ. Nor need that be unlikely in the eyes of any who believe that Christ's coming is

the centre of the world's history, and that there is in prophecy a supernatural element. We are not reading our own fancies into Scripture; we are not using, in allowable freedom, words which had another meaning altogether, to adorn our own theology, but we are apprehending the innermost meaning of prophecy, when we see in it Christ and His salvation (1 Peter i. 10).

We have then here a picture of what Christ does for us weary journeyers on life's road.

#### I. Who are the travellers?

'Redeemed,' 'ransomed of the Lord.' Israel had in its past history one great act, under the imagery of which all future deliverances were prophesied. The events of the Exodus were the great storehouse from which prophets drew the clothing of their brightest hopes; and that is a lesson for us of how to use the history of God's past deliverances. They believed that each transitory act was a revelation of an unchanging purpose and an unexhausted power, and that it would be repeated over and over again. Experience supplied the material out of which Hope wove its fairest webs, but Faith drove the shuttle. Here the names which describe the pilgrims come from the old story. They are slaves, purchased or otherwise set free from captivity by a divine act. The epithets are transferred to the New Testament, and become the standing designation for those who have been delivered by Christ.

That designation, 'ransomed of the Lord,' opens out into the great evangelical thoughts which are the very life-blood of vital Christianity.

Emancipation from bondage is the first thing that we all need. 'He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.' An iron yoke presses on every neck.

The needed emancipation can only be obtained by a ransom price. The question of to whom the ransom is paid is not in the horizon of prophet or apostle or of Jesus Himself, in using this metaphor. What is strongly in their minds is that a great surrender must be greatly made by the Emancipator.

Jesus conceived of Himself as giving 'His life a ransom for the many.'

The emancipation must be a divine act. It surpasses any created power.

There can be no happy pilgrims unless they are first set free.

## II. The end of the journey.

'They shall come to Zion.' It is one great distinctive characteristic and blessedness of the Christian conception of the future that it takes away from it all the chilling sense of strangeness, arising from ignorance and lack of experience, and invests it with the attraction of being the mother-city of us all. So the pilgrims are not travelling a dreary road into the common darkness, but are like colonists who visit England for the first time, and are full of happy anticipations of 'going home,' though they have never seen its shores.

That conception of the future perfect state as a 'city' includes the ideas of happy social life, of a settled polity, of stability and security. The travellers who were often solitary on the march will all be together there. The nomads, who had to leave their camping-place each morning and let the fire that cheered them in the night die down into a little ring of grey ashes, will 'go no more out,' but yet make endless progress within the gates. The defenceless travellers, who were fain to make the best 'laager' they could, and keep vigilant watch for human and bestial enemies

crouching beyond the ring of light from the camp-fires, are safe at last, and they that swallowed them up shall be far away.

Contrast the future outlook of the noblest minds in heathenism with the calm certainty which the gospel has put within the reach of the simplest! 'Blessed are your eyes, for they see.'

### III. The joy of the road.

The pilgrims do not plod wearily in silence, but, like the tribes going up to the feasts, burst out often, as they journey, into song. They are like Jehoshaphat's soldiers, who marched to the fight with the singers in the van chanting 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever.' The Christian life should be a joyful life, ever echoing with the 'high praises of God.' However difficult the march, there is good reason for song, and it helps to overcome the difficulties. 'A merry heart goes all the day, a sad heart tires in a mile.' Why should the ransomed pilgrims sing? For present blessings, for deliverance from the burden of self and sin, for communion with God, for light shed on the meaning of life, and for the sure anticipation of future bliss.

'Everlasting joy on their heads.' Other joys are transitory. It is not only 'we poets' who 'in our youth begin with gladness,' whereof 'cometh in the end despondency and madness'; but, in a measure, these are the outlines of the sequence in all godless lives. The world's festal wreathes wilt and wither in the hot fumes of the banqueting house, and 'the crown of pride shall be trodden under foot.' But joy of Christ's giving 'shall remain,' and even before we sit at the feast, we may have our brows wreathed with a garland 'that fadeth not away.'

## IV. The perfecting of joy at last.

‘They shall obtain joy and gladness’: but had they not had it on their heads as they marched? Yes; but at last they have it in perfect measure and manner. The flame that burned but dimly in the heavy air of earth flashes up into new brightness in the purer atmosphere of the city.

And one part of its perfecting is the removal of all its opposites. Sorrow ends when sin and the discipline that sin needs have ended. ‘The inhabitant shall not say: I am sick; the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.’ Sighing ends when weariness, loss, physical pain, and all the other ills that flesh is heir to have ceased to vex and weigh upon the spirit. Life purges the dross of imperfection from character. Death purges the alloy of sorrow and sighing from joy, and leaves the perfected spirit possessor of the pure gold of perfect and eternal gladness.

## THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH

‘And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord. 15. And Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord, saying, 16. O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, Thou art the God, even Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: Thou hast made heaven and earth. 17. Incline Thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open Thine eyes, O Lord, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God. 18. Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries, 19. And have cast their gods into the fire: for they were no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them. 20. Now therefore, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art the Lord, even Thou only. 21. Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Whereas thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib king of Assyria. . . . 33. Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it. 34. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord. 35. For I will defend this city to save it for mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake. 36. Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. 37. So Sennacherib king of

Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. 38. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Armenia: and Esarhaddon his son reigned in his stead.'—ISAIAH xxxvii. 14-21, 33-38.

Is trust in Jehovah folly or wisdom? That was the question raised by Sennacherib's invasion. A glance at the preceding chapters will show how the high military official, 'the rabshakeh,' or chief of the officers, shaped all his insolent and yet skilful mixture of threats and promises so as to demonstrate the vanity of trust in Egypt or in Jehovah, or in any but 'the great king.' Isaiah had been labouring to lift his countrymen to the height of reliance on Jehovah alone, and now the crucial test of the truth of his contention had come. On the one hand were Sennacherib and his host, flushed with victory, and sure of crushing this puny kingly Hezekiah and his obstinate little city, perched on its rock. On the other was nothing but a prophet's word. Where is the stronger force? And does political prudence dictate reliance on the Unseen or on the visible? The moment is the crisis of Isaiah's work, and this narrative has been placed, with true insight into its importance, at the close of the first half of this book.

To grasp the significance of the text the preceding events have to be remembered. Hezekiah's kingdom had been overrun, and tribute exacted from him. The rabshakeh had been sent from the main body of the Assyrian army, which was down at Lachish in the Philistine low country on the road to Egypt, in order to try to secure Jerusalem by promises and threats, since it was too important a post to leave in the rear, if Egypt was to be invaded. That attempt having failed, and the Egyptian forces being in motion, this new effort was made to induce Hezekiah to surrender.

A letter was sent, whether accompanied by any considerable armed force or no does not appear. At this point the narrative begins. It may be best studied as an illustration of the trial of faith, its refuge, its pleading, and its deliverance.

I. Note the trial of faith. Rabshakeh had derided the obstinate confidence in Jehovah, which kept these starving men on the walls grimly silent in spite of his coaxing. The letter of Sennacherib harps on the same string. It is written in a tone of assumed friendly remonstrance, and lays out with speciousness the apparent grounds for calling trust in Jehovah absurdity. There are no threats in it. It is all an appeal to common sense and political prudence. It marshals undeniable facts. Experience has shown the irresistible power of Assyria. There have been plenty of other little nations which have trusted in their local deities, and what has become of them? Barbarous names are flourished in Hezekiah's face, and their wasted dominions are pointed to as warnings against his committing a parallel folly. There is nothing in the letter which might not have been said by a friend, and nothing which was not said by the Jews who had lost their faith in their God. It was but the putting into plain words of what 'common-sense' and faint faith had often whispered to Hezekiah. The very absence of temper or demand in the letter gives it an aspect of that 'sweet reasonableness' so dear to sense-bound souls.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the letter may stand for a specimen of the arguments which worldly prudence brings to shake faith, in all ages. We, too, are assailed by much that sounds most forcible from the point of view of mere earthly calculation. Sennacherib



does not lie in boasting of his victories. He and his shoals of soldiers are very real and potent. It does seem madness for one little kingdom to stand out, and all the more so because its king is cooped up in his city, as the cuneiform inscription proudly tells, 'like a bird in a cage,' and all the rest of his land is in the conqueror's grip. They who look only at the things seen cannot but think the men of faith mad. They who look at the things unseen cannot but know that the men of sense are fools. The latter elaborately prove that the former are impotent, but they have left out one factor in their calculations, and that is God. One man and God at his back are stronger than Sennacherib and all his mercenaries.

II. Note the refuge of tempted faith. What was Hezekiah to do with the crafty missive? It was hoped that he would listen to reason, and come down from his perch. But he neither yielded nor took counsel with his servants, but, like a devout man, went into the house of the Lord, and spread the letter before the Lord. It would have gone hard with him if he had not been to the house of the Lord many a time before. It is not easy to find our way thither for the first time, when our eyes are blinded by tears or our way darkened by calamities. But faith instinctively turns to God when anything goes wrong, because it has been accustomed to turn to Him when all was right, according to the world's estimate of right and wrong. Whither should the burdened heart betake itself but to Him who daily bears our burdens? The impulse to tell God all troubles is as truly a mark of the faithful soul as the impulse to tell everything to the beloved is the life-breath of love.

The act of spreading the letter before the Lord is an

eloquent symbol, which some prosaic and learned commentators have been dull enough to call gross, and to compare to Buddhist praying-mills! Its meaning is expressed in the prayer which follows. It is faith's appeal to His knowledge. It is faith's casting of its burden on the Lord. Our faith is of little power to bless, unless it impels us to take God into confidence in regard to everything which troubles us. If the letter is not grave enough to be spread before *Him*, it is too small to annoy *us*. If we truly live in fellowship with God, we shall find ourselves in His house, with the cause of our trouble in our hands, before we have time to think. Instinct acts more quickly than reason, and, if our faith be vital, it will not need to be argued into speaking to God of all that weighs upon us.

III. Note the pleading of faith. Hezekiah's address to God is no mere formal recapitulation of divine names, but is the effort of faith to grasp firmly the truths which the enemy denies, and on which it builds. So considered, the accumulation of titles in verse 16 is very instructive, and shows how a trustful soul puts forth the energy of its faith in summoning to mind the great aspects of the divine name as bulwarks against suggested fears, and bases of supplication. Hezekiah appeals to 'the God of Hosts,' the Ruler of all the embattled forces of the universe, as well as of the armies of angels. What is Sennacherib's array compared with these? He appeals to the 'God of Israel,' as pleading the ancient relationship, which binds the unchangeable Guardian of the people to be still what He has been, and casts the responsibility of Israel's preservation upon Him. He appeals to Him 'who sits between the cherubim,' as thence defending and filling the threatened city. He grasps the thought

that Jehovah is 'God alone' with a vividness which is partly due no doubt to Isaiah's teaching, but is also the indignant recoil of faith from the assumption of the letter, that Jehovah was but as the beaten deities of Gozan and the rest. Faith clings the more tenaciously to truths denied, as a dog will hold on to the stick that one tries to pull from it.

Thus, having heartened himself and pled with God by all these names, Hezekiah comes to his petition. It is but translating into words the symbol of spreading the letter before God. He asks God to behold and to hear the defiant words. Prayer tells God what it knows that He knows already, for it relieves the burdened heart to tell Him. It asks Him to see and hear what it knows that He does see and hear. But the prayer is not for mere observance followed by no divine act, but for taking knowledge as the precursor of the appropriate help. Of such seeing and hearing by God, believing prayer is the appointed condition. 'Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him'; but that is not a reason for silence, but for supplication.

Hezekiah rightly regarded Sennacherib's words as meant to reproach the living God, for the point of the letter was to dissuade from trust in Him, as no more powerful than the petty deities of already conquered cities. The prayer, therefore, pleads that God would take care of His own honour, and by delivering Jerusalem, show His sole sovereignty. It is a high and wonderful level for faith to reach, when it regards personal deliverance mainly in its aspect as vindicating God and warranting faith. We may too easily conclude that God's honour is involved in our deliverance, and it is well to be on our guard against that.

But it is possible to die to self so fully as to feel that our cause is His, because His is so entirely ours; and then we may come to that heroic faith which seeks even personal good more for God's sake than for our own. It was noble that this man should have no word to say about self but 'Save us, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art God alone.' Like him, we may each feel that our defence is more God's affair than ours, in proportion as we feel we are His rather than our own. That siege of Jerusalem was indeed as a duel between faith and unbelief on the one hand, and between Jehovah and the gods who were 'no gods' on the other. Sennacherib's letter was a defiant challenge to Jehovah to do His best for this people, and when faith repeated in prayer the insolence of unbelief only one result was possible. It came.

IV. Note the deliverance of faith. Isaiah's grand prophecy tempts us to linger over its many beauties and magnificent roll of triumphant scorn, but it falls outside our purpose. As for the catastrophe, it should be noted that its place and time are not definitely stated, and that probably the notion that the Assyrian army was annihilated before Jerusalem is a mistake. Sennacherib and his troops were at Libnah, on their way to meet the Egyptian forces. If there were any of them before Jerusalem, they would at most be a small detachment, sufficient to invest it. Probably the course of events was that, at some time not specified, soon after the dismissal of the messengers who brought the letter, the awful destruction fell, and that, when the news of the disaster reached the detachment at Jerusalem, as the psalm which throbs with the echoes of the triumph says, 'They were troubled, and hasted away.'

How complete was the crushing blow the lame record of this campaign in the inscriptions shows, in which the failure of the attempt to capture the city is covered up by vapouring about tribute and the like. If it had not failed, however, the success would certainly have been told, as all similar cases are told, with abundant boasting. The other fact is also to be remembered, that Sennacherib tried no more conclusions with Jerusalem and Jehovah, and though he lived for some twenty years afterwards, never again ventured on to the soil where that mighty God fought for His people.

The appended notice of Sennacherib's death has been added by some narrator, since it probably occurred after Isaiah's martyrdom. 'All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' Such a career as his could not but give taste for violence and bloodshed, and diminish regard for human life. Retribution comes slowly, for twenty years intervened between the catastrophe to the army and the murder of the king. Its penalties increase as its fall delays; for first came the blotting out of the army, and then, when that had no effect, at last the sword in his own heart. 'He that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'

But the great lesson of that death is the same as that of the other king's deliverance. Hezekiah 'went unto the house of the Lord,' and found Him a very present help in trouble. Sennacherib was slain in the house of his god. The two pictures of the worshippers and their fates are symbolic of the meaning of the whole story. Sennacherib had dared Jehovah to try His strength against him and his deities. The challenge

was accepted, and that bloody corpse before the idol that could not help preaches a ghastly sermon on the text, 'They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them. O Israel, trust thou in the Lord: He is their help and their shield.'

### WHERE TO CARRY TROUBLES

'And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.'—ISAIAH xxxvii. 14.

WHEN Hezekiah heard the threatenings of Sennacherib's servants, he rent his clothes and went into the house of the Lord, and sent to Isaiah entreating his prayers. When he received the menacing letter, his faith was greater, having been heartened by Isaiah's assurances. So he then himself appealed to Jehovah, spreading the letter before Him, and himself prayed God to guard His own honour, and answer the challenge flung down by the insolent Assyrian. It is noble when faith increases as dangers increase.

I. We have here an example of what to do with troubles and difficulties.

We are to lay them out before God, as we can do by praying about them. Hezekiah's trouble was great. His kingdom could be crushed like an eggshell by the grasp of Sennacherib's hand. But little troubles as well as great ones are best dealt with by being 'spread before the Lord.' Whatever is important enough to disturb me is important enough for me to speak to God about it. Whether the poison inflaming our blood be from a gnat's bite, or a cobra's sting, the best antidote is—pray about it.

How much more real and fervid our prayers would

*1. One is that of strength.*  
*2. For love and mercy.*

be, if we habitually turned all our affairs into materials for petition! That is a very empty dispute as to whether we ought to pray for deliverance from outward sorrows. If we are living in touch with God, we cannot but take Him into our confidence, if we may so say, as to everything that affects us. And we should as soon think of hiding any matter from our dearest on earth as from our Friend in heaven. 'In *everything*, by prayer and supplication' is the commandment, and will be the instinct of the devout heart.

Note Hezekiah's assurance that God cares about him.

Note his clear perception that God is his only help.

Note his identification of his own deliverance with God's honour. We cannot identify our welfare, or deliverance in small matters, with God's fair fame, in such a fashion. But we ought to be quite sure that He will not let us sink or perish, and will never desert us. And we can be quite sure that, if we identify ourselves and our work with Him, He will identify Himself with us and it. His treatment of His servants will tell the world (and not one world only) what He is, how faithful, how loving, how strong.

II. We have here an example of how God answers His servants' prayers.

It was 'by terrible things in righteousness' that Hezekiah's answer came. His prayer was at one end of the chain, and at the other was a camp full of corpses. One poor man's cry can set in motion tremendous powers, as a low whisper can start an avalanche. That magnificent theophany in Psalm xviii., with all its majesty and terror of flashing lightnings and a rocking earth, was brought about by nothing more than 'In my distress I called upon the Lord,' and its purpose

was nothing more than to draw the suppliant out of many waters and deliver him from his strong enemy.

That army swept off the earth may teach us how much God will do for a praying child of His. His people's deliverance is cheaply purchased at such a price. 'He reproved kings for their sake.'

One man with God beside him is stronger than all the world. As the psalmist learned in his hour of peril, 'Thou, Lord, makest me to dwell in safety, thou alone!'

### GREAT VOICES FROM HEAVEN

'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. 6. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: 7. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. 8. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. 9. O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid: say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! 10. Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him: behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.'—ISAIAH xl. 1-10.

How majestically this second part of the Book of Isaiah opens with these mysterious voices! Other prophecies are wont to begin with symbolic visions, but here the ear takes the place of the eye; and instead of forms and flashing lights, which need to be translated, the prophet hears words, the impressiveness of which is heightened by the absence of any designation of the speakers. This much is clear, that the first words are God's, addressed to the prophets. They are the keynote of the whole. Israel is comforted in the assurance



that her trial is ended and her sin purged. Then there is silence, broken by a voice to which no personality is attached, the herald and forerunner of the coming King and God. When the echoes of it have died away, another is heard, commanding yet another unnamed to 'cry,' and, in response to the latter's asking what is to be the burden of his message, bidding him peal out the frailty of man and the eternal vigour of the word of the Lord, which assures its own fulfilment.

Then comes a longer pause. The way has been prepared, the coming God has come; He has set up His throne in the restored Jerusalem, and His glory is seen upon her. So there rings out from unnamed lips the stirring command to the city, thus visited by the indwelling God, to proclaim the glad tidings with a voice, the strength of which shall correspond to their gladness and certainty. This rapid glance at the structure of the whole naturally suggests the four-fold division to which we shall adhere.

I. God speaks and bids His servants speak (vs. 1, 2). That is a wonderfully tender word with which the silence and sadness of exile are broken. The inmost meaning of God's voice is ever comfort. What a world of yearning love there is, too, in the two little words 'my' and 'your'! The exiles are still His; He who has hidden His face from them so long is still theirs. And what was true of them is true of us; for sin may separate us from God, but it does not separate Him from us, and He still seeks to make us recognise the imperishable bond, which itself is the ground of both our comfort and of His will that we should be comforted.

As the very first words go deep into the meaning of all God's voices, and unveil the permanence of His

relation of love even to sinful and punished men, so the next disclose the tender manner of His approach to us, and prescribe the tone for all His true servants: 'Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem,' with loving words, which may win her love; for is she not the bride of Jehovah, fallen though she be? And is not humanity the beloved of Jesus, in whom God's heart is unveiled that our hearts may be won? How shall human voices be softened to tenderness worthy of the message which they carry? Only by dwelling near enough to Him to catch the echoes, and copy the modulations, of His voice, as some birds are taught sweeter notes than their own. The prophet's charge is laid upon all who would speak of Christ to men. Speak to the heart, not only to the head or to the conscience. God beseeches in the person of His 'ambassadors.' The substance of the message may well find its way to the heart; for it is the assurance that the long, hard service of the appointed term of exile is past, that the sin which brought it about is forgiven, and, more wonderful and gracious still, that God's mercy reckons that the ills which followed on faithlessness have more than expiated it. We need not seek for any other explanation of these startling words than the exuberance of the divine pity, which 'doth not willingly afflict.'

Of course, the captivity is in the foreground of the prophet's vision; but the wider sense of the prophecy embraces the worse captivity of sin under which we all groan, and the divine voice bids His prophets proclaim that Jehovah comes, to set us all free, to end the weary bondage, and to exact no more punishment for sins.

II. The forerunner speaks. There is something very

impressive in the abrupt bursting in of this second voice, all unnamed. It is the reverberation, as it were, of the former, giving the preparation on the side of man for the coming of Jehovah. Israel in bondage in Egypt had been delivered by Jehovah marching through the wilderness, a wilderness stretched between Babylon and Jerusalem; these supply the scenery, so to speak; but the scenery is symbolic, and the call is really one to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness of human sin, by raising up the cast-down by reason of transgressions or sorrows, to subdue lofty thoughts and self-sufficiency by humble self-abnegation, to make the 'crooked things' or 'rugged things' straight or smooth, and the rough ground where heights were tumbled on heights a deep valley, by forsaking evil.

The moral preparation, not the physical, is meant. It was fitting that the road for such a coming should be prepared. But the coming was not so contingent on the preparation that the 'glory of the Lord' would not 'be revealed' unless men made a highway for Him. True, that the revelation of His glory to the individual soul must be preceded by such a preparation; but that raising of abjectness and levelling of loftiness needs some perception of Him ere it can be done by man. Christ must come to the heart before the heart can be prepared for His coming. John the Baptist came crying in the wilderness, but his fiery message did little to cast up a highway for the footsteps of the King. John's immovable humility pierced to the very heart of the prophecy when he answered the question 'Who art thou?' with 'I am a voice. The voice was unnamed; why, what does it matter who I am?'

The substance and the range of the coming manifes-

tation are next defined. It is to be the revelation of 'the glory of the Lord,' and to be for all mankind, not for Israel only. That lowly life and that shameful death were a strange revelation of God's glory. If *they* revealed it, then it cannot consist in power or any of the majestic 'attributes,' but in love, pity, and long-suffering. Love is the divinest thing in God. The guarantee for all lies simply here, that God has spoken it. It is because the unnamed herald's ear has heard the divine voice uttering the gracious assurances of verse 1, that *his* voice is lifted up in the commands and assurances of verse 4. Absolute faith in God's utterances, however they seem to transcend experience, is wisdom and duty.

III. Yet another voice, whether sounding from heaven or earth is as uncertain as is the person to whom it is addressed, authoritatively commands a third to 'cry,' and, on being asked what is to be the burden of the call, answers. This new herald is to proclaim man's frailty and the immortal vigour of God's word, which secures the fulfilment of His promises. Is it the questioning voice, or the commanding one, which says, 'All flesh is grass, . . . the people is grass'? If the former, it is the utterance of hopelessness, all but refusing the commission. But, dramatic as that construction is, it seems better to regard the whole as the answer to the question, 'What shall I cry?' The repetition of the theme of man's frailty is not unnatural, and gives emphasis to the contrast of the unchangeable stability of God's word. An hour of the deadly hot wind will scorch the pastures, and all the petals of the flowers among the herbage will fall. So everything lovely, bright, and vigorous in humanity wilts and dies. One thing alone remains fresh from age to age,—the uttered will of

Jehovah. His breath kills and makes alive. It withers the creatural, and it speaks the undying word.

This message is to follow those others which tell of God's merciful promises, that trembling hearts may not falter when they see all created stays sharing the common lot, but may rest assured that God's promises are as good as God's facts, and so may hope when all things visible would preach despair. It was given to hearten confidence in the prophecy of a future revelation of the glory of God. It remains with us to hearten confidence in a past revelation, which will stand unshaken, whatever forces war against it. Its foes and its friends are alike short-lived as the summer's grass. The defences of the one and the attacks of the other are being antiquated while being spoken; but the bare word of God, the record of the incarnate Word, who is the true revelation of the glory of God, will stand for ever,—'And this is the Word which by the gospel is preached to you.'

IV. The prophet seems to be the speaker in verses 9-11, or perhaps the same anonymous voice which already commanded the previous message summons Jerusalem to become the ambassadress of her God. The coming of the Lord is conceived as having taken place, and He is enthroned in Zion. The construction which takes Jerusalem or Zion (the double name so characteristic of the second part of Isaiah) to be the recipient of the good tidings is much less natural than that which regards her as their bearer.

The word rendered 'tellest good tidings' is a feminine form, and falls in with the usual personification of a city as a woman. She, long laid in ruins, the Niobe of nations, the sad and desolate widow, is bid to bear to

her daughter cities the glad tidings, that God is in her of a truth. It is exactly the same thought as 'Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.' The prophecy refers to the Church. It sets forth her highest office as being the proclamation of her indwelling King. The possession of Christ makes the Church the evangelist for the world; for it gives the capacity and the impulse as well as the obligation to speak the glad tidings. Every Christian has this command binding on him by the fact of his having Christ.

The command sets forth the bold clearness which should mark the herald's call. Naturally, anyone with a message to peal out to a crowd would seek some vantage-ground, from which his words might fly the farther. If we have a message to deliver, let us seek the best place from which to deliver it. 'Lift up thy voice with strength.' No whisper will do. Bated breath is no fit vehicle for God's gospel. There are too many of God's heralds who are always apologising for their message, and seeking to reconcile it with popular opinions. We are all apt to speak truth less confidently because it is denied; but, while it is needful to speak with all gentleness and in meekness to them that oppose, it is cowardly, as well as impolitic, to let one tremor be heard in our tones though a world should deny our message.

The command tells the substance of the Church's message. Its essence is the proclamation of the manifested God. To gaze on Jesus is to behold God. That God is made known in the twin glories of power and gentleness. He comes 'as a strong one.' His dominion rests on His own power, and on no human allies. His reign is retributive, and that not merely as penally

recompensing evil, but as rewarding the faith and hope of those who waited for Him.

But beyond the limits of our text, in verse 11, we have the necessary completion of the manifestation, in the lovely figure of the Shepherd carrying the lambs in His arms, and gently leading the flock of returning exiles. The strength of Jesus is His lowliness; and His mighty arm is used, not to wield an iron sceptre, but to gather us to His bosom and guide us in His ways. The paradox of the gospel, which points to a poor, weak man dying in the dark on a cross and says, 'Behold the great Power of God!' is anticipated in this prophecy. The triumphant paradox of the Apostle is shadowed here: 'We preach Christ crucified, . . . the power of God, and the wisdom of God.'

### O THOU THAT BRINGEST GOOD TIDINGS

'O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain: O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!'—ISAIAH xl. 9.

THERE is something very grand in these august and mysterious voices which call one to another in the opening verses of this chapter. First, the purged ear of the prophet hears the divine command to him and to his brethren—Comfort Jerusalem with the message of the God who comes for her deliverance. Then afar off another voice is heard, the herald and forerunner of the approaching Deity; and when thus the foundation has been laid, yet another takes up the speech, and 'The voice said, Cry,' and the anonymous recipient of the command asks with what message he shall be entrusted, and the answer is the signature and pledge

of the divine fulfilment of the word thus spoken. And then there comes, as I take it, a pause of silence, within which the great Epiphany and manifestation takes place, and the coming God comes, enters into the rebuilt city, and there shines in His beauty; and then breaks forth the rapturous commandment of my text to the resuscitated city, to tell to all her daughters of Judah the glad tidings of a present God.

I need not, I suppose, spend your time in vindicating the translation of our Bible as against one which has been made very familiar by being wedded to Handel's music, and has commended itself to many, according to which Zion is rather the recipient than the herald of the tidings, 'O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength,' and so on.

And I suppose I need not either spend any time in vindicating the transference of the text to the Gentile Church, beyond the simple remark that, whatever be the date of this second portion of Isaiah's prophecy, its standpoint is the time of the Captivity, when Jerusalem lay desolate, burned with fire, and all their pleasant things were laid waste, so that the city here addressed is the new form of the ancient Zion, which had risen from her ashes, and had a better tidings of glad significance to impart to all the nations. And so, dear brethren, looking at the words from that point of view, I think that they may very fairly yield to us two or three very old-fashioned and well-worn thoughts, which may yet be stimulating and encouraging to us. I take them as simply as possible, just as they run here in this text, which brings out very strikingly and beautifully, first, the function of the



Evangelist Zion; secondly, the manner of her message; and lastly, its contents.

I. Look with me at the thoughts that cluster round the name, 'O Zion, that bringest glad tidings.'

It is almost a definition of the Church; at any rate, it is a description of her by her most characteristic office and function, that which marks and separates her from all associations and societies of men. This is her highest office; this is the reason of her being; this is her noblest dignity. All mystical powers have been claimed for her, men have been bidden to submit their judgment and manhood to her authority; but her true dignity is that she bears a gospel in her hand, and that grace is poured into her lips. Fond and sense-bound regrets have been sighed forth that her miracle-working gifts have faded away; but so long as her voice can quicken dead souls, and make the tongue of the dumb to speak, her noblest energies remain unimpaired, and so we may think of her as most exalted and dignified in that her Master addresses her, 'O Zion, that bringest good tidings.'

Now, if I was right in my preliminary remark, to the effect that, prior to my text, we are to suppose the manifestation and approach of the Divine Deliverer, then I think it is quite clear that what constitutes Zion the messenger of good tidings is the presence in her of the living God. Translate that into New Testament language, and it just comes to this: that what constitutes the Church the evangelist for the world is the simple possession of Christ or of the Gospel. That thought branches into some considerations on which we may touch.

The first of them is this: Whoever has Christ has the power to impart Him. All believers are preachers, or

meant to be so, by virtue of the possession of that Divine Christ for your own. We Nonconformists are ready enough to proclaim the universal priesthood of all believers when we are opposing ecclesiastical assumption; are we as ready to take it for the law of our own lives, and to say, 'Yes, priests by the imposition of a mightier hand, and ministers of Christ by the possession of Christ, and therefore bound and able to impart Him to all around'? He has given us His love, and He thereby has made us fit to impart Him. Zion only needed to receive its God, in order thereby to possess the power to say unto all the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God.' It does not take much genius, it does not take much culture, it does not need any prolonged training, for a man who has Christ to say, 'Behold, I have Him.' The very first Christian sermon that was ever preached was a very short one, and a very effectual one, for it converted the whole congregation, and it was this: 'We have found the Messiah.' That was all—the utterance of individual possession and personal experience—and it 'brought him to Jesus.'

Take another point. The possession of Christ for ourselves imposes upon us the obligation to impart Him. All property in this world is trust property, and everything that a man has that can help or bless the moral or spiritual or intellectual condition of his fellows, he is thereby under solemn obligation to impart. There is an obligation arising from the bands that knit us to one another, so that no man can possess his good alone without being untrue to what we call nowadays the solidarity of humanity. You have, you say, the bread of life: very well, what would you think of a man in a famine who, when women were

boiling their children, and men were fighting with the swine on the dunghill for garbage, was content to eat his morsel alone, and leave others to perish by starvation? You possess, you say, the healing for all the diseases of humanity: very well, what would you think of a man who, in a pestilence, was contented with swallowing his own specific, and leaving others to die and to rot in the street? If you have the Christ, you have Him that you may impart Him. 'He that withholdeth bread, the people shall curse him'; of how much deeper malediction from despairing lips will they be thought worthy who call themselves the followers of Him that gave His life to be the bread of the world, and yet withhold it from famishing souls?

And it is an obligation that arises, too, from the very purposes of our calling. What are Christian men and women saved for? For their own blessedness? Yes, and no. No creature in God's great universe but is great enough to be a worthy end of the divine action; the happiness of the humblest and most insignificant moves His mighty hand. Ay, but no creature in God's universe so great as that he is a worthy end of the divine action, if he is going to keep all the divine gifts in himself. We are all brought into the light that we may impart light.

'Heaven doth with us as we with torches do;  
 Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues  
 Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike  
 As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touch'd  
 But to fine issues.'

II. And now turn to the second thought which I desire to draw from these words. We have here, in a

very picturesque and vivid form, the setting forth of the manner in which the Evangelist Zion is to proclaim her message.

The fair-featured herald is bidden to get up into the high mountain—perhaps a mere picturesque detail, perhaps some reference to the local position of the city set upon a hill—like the priests on Ebal and Gerizim, or Alpine shepherds, calling to each other across the valleys, to secure some vantage-ground, and next, to let her voice roll out across the glen. No faltering whisper will do, but a voice that compels audience, that can be heard above the tumult and afar off, and confident and loud and clear, because courageous and without dread. ‘Lift up thy voice with strength.’ Yes, but a timid heart will make a tremulous voice, and fear and doubt will whisper a message when courage will ring it out. ‘Be not afraid’ is the foundation of the clearness and the loudness with which the word is to be uttered.

That thought opens itself out into these two others, on each of which I say a word or two. Our message is to be given with a courage and a force that are worthy of it; ‘Be not afraid.’ That is a lesson for this day, my brethren. There are plenty of causes of fear round about us if, like poor Peter on the water, we look at the waves instead of at the Master. There are the great forces of evil that are always arrayed against Christ. There is the thoroughgoing and formidable rejection of all that is dearest to us, which is creeping like poison through cultivated society at home; there is the manifest disproportion between our resources and the task that we have set ourselves to. ‘They need not depart; give ye them to eat,’ said the Master. What! five thousand people need not

depart, and only this scanty provision of loaves and fishes! Yes; the Master's hand can multiply it. There is the consciousness of our own weakness; there is the apparent slow progress of the Gospel in the world. All these things come surging in upon us when our spirits are low and our faith weak; and yet the message comes to us, 'Be not afraid.' I venture to break that injunction up into two or three exhortations, which I cast into the shape of exhortations, not from any assumption of superiority, but for the sake of point and force.

First of all, I would say, let us cherish a firm, soul-absorbing confidence in the power and truth of the message we have to carry. I do not speak now of the intellectual discipline which may be required from each of us to meet the difficulties of this day—that is outside of my present subject; but there is a moral discipline quite as important as the intellectual. There cannot be any question, I suppose, to any one who looks round about, and notices the tendencies of his own mind, but that all we Christian people, in our various circles and organisations, are under a very great temptation to a very perceptible lowering of our key in the presence of widespread doubt. We are tempted to fancy that a truth is less certain because it is denied; that because *A* has attacked this thing, and *B*'s clever book has unsettled that thing, and *C*'s researches seem to cast a great deal of doubt upon that other thing, therefore we are to surrender them all, and talk about them as if they were doubtful problems or hypotheses rather than sure verities of our faith. And there are some of us, I venture to say, who are in danger of another temptation, and that is of getting a little ashamed and becoming afraid to say 'Yes,

I stand by that great truth, God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,' for fear of being thought to be—well, 'narrow' is the favourite word, 'old-fashioned,' or 'holders of a creed outworn,' 'in antagonism with the spirit of the age,' and so on, and so on. Brethren, I am not the man, I hope, to preach an unreasonable attitude of antagonism; I am not the man to ask anybody to exaggerate his beliefs because somebody else denies them, but I do believe that among us all, and especially among young men, there is the temptation just to be a little bit afraid, and not to let the voice ring out with that clear certitude which becomes the messenger of the Cross. Try by mental discipline to find intellectual standing-ground that will be firm below your feet, and then remember that that is not all, but that moral discipline is wanted also that I may open my mouth boldly, as I ought to speak.'

And then, if I might venture to dwell for a moment or two further upon this class of consideration, I would say, Do not let us make too much of the enemy. There is no need why we should take them at their own appraisal. Men are always tempted to think that no generation ever had such a fight as their own generation. They have said that ever since there was a Christian Church. But the true, healthy way of looking at the adversary—and by that I mean all the various forms of difficulty which beset us in our evangelistic work, difficulties in the mission-field, difficulties in the state of things here round us—the true, healthy way of looking at them all, is to look at them as the brave Apostle Paul did, when he said, 'I am going to stop at Ephesus till Pentecost, for there is a great and effectual door opened to

me.' And how did he know that? He tells us in the next clause, 'There are many adversaries.' Where there are many adversaries, there is an effectual door, if you and I are bold and big enough to go in and occupy.

And then I would venture to say, still further, let us remember the victories of the past. Let us make personal experience of the overcoming powers that are stored and hidden in Christ's Gospel. And, above all, let us remember who fights with us. Jesus Christ and one man are always the majority. There is an old story, which you may remember, about the Conqueror of Rome, who dashed his sword into the scales when the ransom was being weighed; and Christ flings His sharp sword with the two edges into the scales when we are weighing resources, and the other kicks the beam. There are enemies, plenty of them, all round about. Yes, and the spreading forth of their wings fills the breadth of the land. Be it so. But notwithstanding the irruption of the barbarous and cruel hosts, it is 'Thy land, O Emanuel!' And in His time He will sweep them before His presence, as the north wind drives the locusts into the hindermost sea. I do not know if any of you remember an ancient Christian legend, and I do not know whether it is a legend or a truth—it does not matter, it will serve for our purpose all the same either way—how when the Emperor Julian, surnamed the Apostate, once taunted a humble Christian man with the question, 'What is the carpenter's son doing now?' and the answer was, 'Hewing wood for the emperor's funeral pile,' and not very long after there came the fatal field on which, according to ancient tradition, he died with the words on his lips, 'Thou hast conquered, Galilean.' As in

Carlyle's grand translation of Luther's Hymn of the Reformation—

‘Of our own strength we nothing can,  
Full soon were we downriden ;  
But for us fights the proper Man,  
Whom God Himself hath bidden.  
Ask ye, who is the same ?  
Christ Jesus is His name,  
The Lord Sabaoth's Son.  
He and none other one  
Shall conquer in this battle.’

‘Lift up thy voice with strength ; lift it up, be not afraid.’

III. I come to the last thought that emerges from these words, and that is the substance and contents of the Evangelist Zion's message : ‘Say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God !’

They were to be pointed to a great historical act, in which God had manifested and made Himself visible to men ; and the words of my text are, not only an exclamation, but they are an entreaty, and the message was to be given to these little daughter cities of Judah as representing all of those for whom the deliverance had been wrought—all which things are paralleled in the message that is committed to our hand.

For, first of all, we all have given to us the charge of pointing men to the great historical fact wherein God is visible to men, and so crying, ‘Behold your God !’ God cannot be revealed by word, God cannot be revealed by thought. There is no way open to Him to make Himself known to His creatures except the way by which men make themselves known to one another ; that is, by their deeds ; and so, high above all speculation, high above all abstraction, nearer to us than all thought stands the historical fact in which God shows



Himself to the world, and that is the person and work of Jesus Christ, 'the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person,' in whom the abysses of the divine nature are opened, and through whom all the certitude of divine light that human eyes can receive pours itself in genial and yet intensest radiance upon the world. How beautiful in that connection the verses following my text are I need only indicate in a word as I pass, 'Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand,' and yet, 'behold, He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.' And so in Christ is the power of God, for I take it that He is the arm of the Lord; and in Christ is the gentleness of God; and whilst men grope in the darkness, our business is to point to the living, dying Son, and to say, 'There you have the complete, the ultimate revelation of the unseen God.'

And do not let us forget that the burning centre of all that brightness is the Cross, that ever-wondrous paradox; that the depth of humiliation is the height of glorifying; that Christ's Cross is the throne of the manifested divine power quite as much as it is the seat of the manifested divine love, and that when He is hanging there in His weakness and mortal agony, the words are yet true—strange, paradoxical, blessedly true—'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' And when we say, pointing to His Cross and Him there, His brow paled with dying, and His soul faint with loss—when we say, 'Behold the Lamb!' we are also and therein saying, 'Behold your God!'

And therefore, with what of gentleness, with what of tenderness, with what of patient entreaty as well as strength and confidence, the word that speaks of a strength manifested in weakness, and a God made visible in Christ, should be spoken, it needs not here to

enlarge upon—only take that one last thought that I suggested, that this message comes to all those for whom God has appeared, and for whom the deliverance has been wrought. We each have the right, and we each have the charge, to go to every man and say, ‘Behold your God!’ and the hearts of men will leap up to meet the message. For, though overlaid by sin, perverted often into its own opposite by fear, misinterpreted and misunderstood by the very men that bear it, there yet lies deep in every heart the aching thirst for the living God, and we have the word that alone can meet that thirst. All around us men are saying—‘In all the fields of science and of nature, in human history and in the spirit of men, I find no God,’ and are falling back into that dreary negation, ‘Behold, we know not anything!’ And some of them, orphaned in their agony, are crying, though it be often in contemptuous tones that almost sound as if they meant the opposite, ‘Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!’ We have a word that can meet that. For cultivated Europe it has come to this—Christ or nothing; either He has shown us the Father, or there is no knowledge of Him possible. We do not need to dread the alternative; we can face it, and overcome it. And in far-off lands men are groping in twilight uncertainty, worshipping, with a nameless horror at their hearts, gods capricious, gods cruel, gods terrible—tamely believing in gods far-off and mysterious, cowering before gods careless and heartless, degrading their manhood by imitating gods foul and bestial, and yet all the while dimly feeling, ‘Surely, surely there is somewhere a good and a fair Being, that has an eye to see my sorrows, and a heart to pity them; an ear to hear my prayer, and a hand to stretch out.’ We have a word that can meet that. Let that

word ring out, brother, as far as your influence can reach. Set the trumpet to thy mouth, and say, 'Behold your God!' and be sure that from the uttermost parts of the earth we shall hear the choral songs of many voices answering, 'Lo! this is our God, we have waited for Him, and He will save us! This is our God; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation!'

### 'HAVE YE NOT? HAST THOU NOT?'

'Have ye not known, have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? . . . Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard?'—ISAIAH xl. 21 and 28.

THE recurrence of the same form of interrogation in these two verses is remarkable. In the first case the plural is used, in the second the singular, and we may reasonably conclude that as Israel is addressed in the latter, the nations outside the sphere illumined by Revelation are appealed to in the former. The context of the two passages confirms this reference, for the witness of Creation and History is summoned in the former section, and that of God's inward dealings with trustful souls is brought out in the latter.

#### I. What Nature and History tell men about God.

Observe that emphatic '*told* you'; then the witness here appealed to is truly a Revelation, though a silent one. 'There is no speech nor language,' yet 'their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.'

The general idea of the divine nature, as revealed 'from the beginning' and 'from the foundation of the earth,' is that of Majesty transcending all comparison.

The contrast is drawn between Him and men, in the

magnificent image of Him as throned above 'the circle of the earth,' and so far above that all the busy tribes of men 'are as grasshoppers,' their restless activity but aimless leaping, and 'the tumult of the peoples' only as a meaningless chirping.

God's creative and sustaining power is further set forth by that great image of His 'stretching out the heavens as a curtain, and spreading them out as a tent to dwell in.' As easily as travellers set up their tents when the day's march is done, did He stretch the great expanse above the low earth; and all its depths and spaces are, in comparison with Him, thin, transient, and as easily rolled up and put aside as the stuff that makes a nomad's home for a night. Nor are the two implied thoughts that 'the heavens' are a veil screening Him from men even while they tell of Him to men, and that they are His lofty dwelling-place, to be left out of view.

But in verse 26 we have a more specific and grander exhibition of God's relation to the Universe. The stars, in number numberless, are conceived of as a great army drilled and directed by Him. And that metaphor, familiar to us as it is, and condensed into the divine title so frequent in this prophetic book, is pregnant with great truths.

It speaks of God as the Emperor, the Commander, exercising supreme authority by 'the word of His power,' and of creation as obedient thereto. 'For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in the heavens.' The Commander needs but to speak, and so mystic is the power of His uttered will, that effects on the material universe follow that altogether immaterial energy.

It speaks of the harmony and order of the whole Creation. 'By number' and 'by name' He sways and

ranks them. 'All things work together.' They are an ordered whole—a kosmos, not a chaos. Modern science is slowly establishing by experiment the truth which is enshrined in that old name, 'the Lord of hosts,' that all things in the physical universe are a unity.

It speaks of the perfectness of God's knowledge of each item in the mighty whole. 'He calleth them all by name.' Thereby are expressed authority, ownership, particular knowledge of, and relation to, each individual of the overwhelming aggregate. God knows all, because He knows each.

It speaks of the inexhaustible energy of His sustaining power, and the consequent strength of His creatures. 'Preservation is a continued creation.' The prophet saw much deeper than the mechanical view of the creative act. To him God was, to use more modern language, 'immanent' as well as 'transcendent.' True, He 'sits above the circle of the earth,' but as truly He is working on His creatures, and it is by His communicated strength that they are strong. If any being—star, or insect—were separated utterly from Him, it would crumble into nothingness.

But the appeal to Creation is singularly interrupted by an appeal to History. The prophet drops from the serene expanse of the silent yet eloquent heavens to the stormy scenes of changing dynasties and revolutions of earth's kingdoms. How calm the one, how tumultuous the other! How the one witnesses to Him by its apparently unchanging continuance! how the other witnesses by its swift mutations! In the one, He is revealed as Preserver; in the other, the most clear demonstration of His power is given in His destroying of rebel kingdoms. But in these acts by which ancient and firmly rooted dynasties are rooted

up or withered as by the simoom, He reveals a side of His nature to which the calm heavens bore no witness. He is the moral Governor of the world. 'The history of the world is the judgment of the world,' and when hoary iniquities are smitten to death, 'the Holy One' is revealed as the righteous Judge. And the conjoint witness of creation and of history attests that none can be 'likened' to Him.

## II. What Revelation tells Israel about God.

It is noteworthy that in the section of which our first text is the centre, there is no mention of the divine Name, and even the well-known title, 'the Holy One of Israel,' is truncated, so as to leave out reference to the people of Revelation; whereas in this section He is not only designated as God and Creator, but as Jehovah, the God who has made a covenant with Israel, and made known His will and to some extent His nature. The distinct climax in the divine Names itself implies a nobler relation to men, and a clearer revelation than was declared in the former part of this prophecy. It is the fitting preparation for the loftier and infinitely more tender and touching aspect of the divine nature which shines with lambent, inviting lustre within the sphere of Revelation.

The distinctive glory of the long process of God's self-manifestation to Israel is that, while it emphasises all that nature and history affirm of Him, it sets Him forth as restoring the weak, as well as sustaining the strong. The sad contrast between the untroubled and unwearied strength of the calm heavens and the soon-exhausted strength of struggling and often beaten men strikes the poet prophet's sensitive soul. He did not know, what modern astronomy teaches us, that change, convulsions, ruin, are not confined to earth,

but that stars as well as men faint and fail, dwindle and die. The scriptural view of Nature is not that of the scientist, but that of the poet and of the devout man. It lies quite apart from the scientific attitude, and has as good a right to exist as it has. The contrast of heaven and earth is for the prophet the contrast of strength with weakness, of joyful harmony with moral disorder, of punctual, entire obedience with rebellion and the clash of multitudes of anarchic self-willed men.

But there is a sadder contrast still—namely, that between God and the wretched weaklings that men have made of themselves. 'He fainteth not, neither is weary.' Strange anomaly that in His universe there should be the faint and 'them that have no might'! The only explanation of such an exception to the order of Creation is that men have broken loose from Creation's dependence on God, and that therefore the inflow of sustaining strength has been checked. In other words, man's weakness comes from man's sin.

Hence to restore strength to those whose power has been drained away by sin is God's divinest work. It is more to restore than to sustain. It takes less energy to keep a weight stationary at a height than to roll it up again if it falls to the bottom. Since sin is the cause of our weakness, the first step to deliver from the weakness is to deliver from the sin. If we are ever to be restored, hearts, consciences, averted wills must be dealt with—and but One Hand can deal with these.

And not only does God outdo all His mightiest works in the work of restoring strength to the faint, but He crowns that restoration by making the restored weakling like Himself. 'He fainteth not, neither is

weary.' They, too, 'shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' In the long drawn out grind of monotonous marching along the common path of daily small duties and uneventful life, they shall not faint; in the rare occasional spurts, occurring in every man's experience, when extraordinary tax is laid on heart and limbs, they shall not be weary. And they will be able both to walk and to run, because they soar on wings as eagles. And they do all because they wait on the Lord. Communion with Him buoys us above this low earth, and bears us up into the heavenly places, and, living there, we shall be fit for the slow hours of commonplace plodding and for the crowded moments of great crises.

#### UNFAILING STARS AND FAINTING MEN

' . . . For that He is strong in power; not one faileth. . . . He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.'—ISAIAH xl. 26 and 29.

THESE two verses set forth two widely different operations of the divine power as exercised in two sadly different fields, the starry heavens and this weary world. They are interlocked, as it were, by the recurrence in the latter of the emphatic words of the former. The one verse says, 'He is strong in power'; the other, 'He giveth power.' In the former verse, 'the greatness of His might' sustains the stars; in the latter verse, a still diviner operation is set forth in that 'to them that have no might He increaseth strength.' Thus there are three contrasts suggested: that between unfailing stars, and men that faint; that between the unwearied God and wearied men; and that between the sustaining power that is exercised in



the heavens and the restoring power that is manifested on earth.

There is another interlocking between the latter of these two texts and its context, which is indicated by a similar recurrence of epithets. In my second text we read of the 'faint,' and in the verse that follows it, again we find the expressions 'faint' and 'weary,' while in the verse before my text we read that 'the Lord fainteth not, neither is weary.' So again the contrast between Him and us is set forth, but, in the verse that closes the chapter, we read how that contrast merges into likeness, inasmuch as the unfainting and unwearied God makes even the men that wait upon Him unwearied and unfainting. Here, then, we have lessons that we may well ponder.

Note, first—

I. That sad contrast.

The prophet in the former of these verses seems to be expanding the thoughts that lie in the name, 'the Lord of hosts,' in so far as that name expresses the divine relation to the starry universe. The image that underlies both it and the words of the text is that of a captain who commands his soldiers, and they obey. Discipline and plan array them in their ranks; they are not a mob, but an army. The voice that reads the roll-call summons one after another to his place, and, punctually obedient, there they stand, ready for any evolution that may be prescribed. The plain prose of which is, that night by night above the horizon rise the bright orbs, and roll on their path obedient to the Sovereign will; 'because He is strong in might not one' is lacking. Astronomers have taught us, what the prophet did not know, that even in the apparently serene spaces there are collisions and catastrophes,

and that stars may dwindle and dim, and finally go out. But while Scripture deals with creation neither from the scientific nor from the æsthetic point of view, it leaves room for both of these—for all that the poet's imagination can see or say, for all that the scientist's investigation can discover, it sees that beneath the beauty is the Fountain of all loveliness, beneath and behind the 'number' of the numberless stars works the infinite will of God. Surely an intelligible creation must have an intelligent source. Surely a universe in which Mind can apprehend order and number must have a Mind at the back of it. Wordsworth has nobly said of Duty what we may more truly say of God: 'Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong, And the most ancient heavens through Thee are fresh and strong.' 'For that He is great in might, not one faileth.' Scripture bids us think of God, not as a creative energy that set the universe in motion, and leaves it to roll or spin, but as of a Divine Presence—to use a word which can only be in a very modified sense applied to that mysterious, intelligent Entity—operating in, and being the sustaining Cause of, all that is. This Divine Presence stamps its signature on the unfailing strength of these bright creatures above.

But in our second text we drop from the illumination of the heavens to the shadowed plain of this low earth. It is as if a man, looking up into the violet sky, with all its shining orbs, should then turn to some reeking alley, with its tumult and its squalor. Just because man is greater than the stars, man 'fails,' whilst they shine on unwearied. For what the prophet has in view as the clinging curse that cleaves to our greatness, is not merely the bodily fatigue which

is necessarily involved in the very fact of bodily existence, since energy cannot be put forth without waste and weariness, but it is far more the weary heart, the heart that is weary of itself, the heart that is weary of toil, the heart that is weary of the momentary crises that demand effort, and wearier still of the effortless monotony of our daily lives; the heart that all of us carry, and which to all of us sometimes whispers, with a dark and gloomy voice which we cannot contradict, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' I was going to say, happy are you if you do not know that weariness, but I check myself and say, tenfold more miserable are you if you have never been sober and wise enough to have felt the weariness and weight of all this unintelligible world, and of your own sorry selves.

For it is ever to be remembered that the faintness and the ebbing away of might, which is the truly tragic thing in humanity, does not depend upon physical constitution, but upon separation from the Source of all strength, breaking the union between ourselves and God. If a star could shake off its dependence, and shut out the influx of the sustaining power that by continual creation preserves it, it would die into darkness, or crumble into dust. It cannot, and we cannot, in so far as our physical being is concerned, but we can shake ourselves free from God, in so far as the life of the spirit is concerned, and the godless spirit bears the Cain-curse of restlessness and weariness ever upon it. So the contrast between the unfailing strengths that ever shine down upon us from the heavens, and the weariness of body and of mind afflicting the sleeping millions on whom they shine, is tragical indeed. But far more tragical is the contrast, of which the other is but an indication because it is a consequence, the con-

trast between the punctual obedience with which these hosts, summoned by the great Commander, appear and take their places, and the self-will which turns a man into a 'wandering star unto whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.' Above is peace and order, because above is the supremacy of an uncontested will. Below is tumult and weariness, because when God says 'Thou shalt,' men respond, 'I will not.'

Secondly, my text suggests to us—

II. Another sad contrast, melting into a blessed likeness.

'He fainteth not, neither is weary.' 'He giveth power to the faint.' 'Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail,' but waiting on God the curse removes, and faintness and weariness cease, and the humble man becomes in some measure participant of, and conformed to, that life which knows no exhausting, operates unspent, burns with an undying flame, works and never wearies. We may take to ourselves all the peace and strength that come from that transcendent hope, whilst we are still subject, as of course we must be, to the limitations imposed on spirits fettered, as well as housed, in body. Whilst toil leaves as its consequence fatigue, and as our days increase our strength wanes; whilst physical weariness remains unaffected, there may pour into our spirits the influx of divine power, by which they will remain fresh and strong through advancing years and heavy tasks and stiff battles. Is it not something to believe it possible that

' In old age, when others fade,  
We fruit still forth shall bring'? /

Is it not something to know it as a possibility that we may have that within us which has no tendency to

decay, which neither perishes with the using nor is exhausted by exercise, which grows the more the longer we live, which has in it the pledge of immortality, because it has in it the impossibility of exhaustion? Thus to all of us who know how weary life sometimes is, thus to those of us who in the flush of our youth are deceived into thinking that the vigorous limbs will always be vigorous, and the clear eyesight will always be keen, and to those of us who, in the long weary levels of middle life, where there are few changes, are worn out by the eventless recurrence, day after day, of duties that have become burdensome, because they are so small, and to those of us who are learning by experience how inevitably early strength utterly fails; to us all surely it comes us a gospel, 'They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' It is true; and each of us may set to our seals, if we will, that the promise is faithful and sure.

Is that not a higher exercise of power than to 'preserve the stars from wrong'? Is not the strength that restores mightier than the strength that sustains? Is not the hand that, put beneath the falling body, stops its plunge, and lifts it whence it fell, displaying a greater manifestation of strength, than the hand that held it unfalling at the height? The mighty miracle of the calm, steadfast heavens, with no vacant spaces where yesterday a star blazed, is less than the miracle of that restoring energy which, coming to men separated from the Fountain of power, re-establishes the connection between them, and out of the fainting creature makes one that is neither faint nor weary for ever. God is greater, in the miracle that He works

upon you and me, poor strengthless souls, than when He rolls the stars along. Redemption is more than Creation, and to the hosts of 'the principalities and powers in heavenly places, is made known,' by the Church, 'of restored and redeemed souls, the manifold wisdom of God.'

What are the consequences that the prophet traces to this restoring power? 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles.' Power to soar, to lift our heavy selves from earth, and to reach the heavenly places where we shall commune with God, that is the greatest of all gifts to strengthened spirits. And it is the foundation of all the others, for it is only they who know how to soar that can creep, and it is only they who have renewed their strength hour by hour, by communion with the Source of all energy and might, who when they 'drop with quivering wings, composed and still,' down to the low earth, there live unwearied and unfainting.

'They shall run and not be weary.' Crises come—moments when circumstances demand from us more than ordinary energy and swifter rate of progress. We have often, in the course of our years, to make short spurts of unusual effort. 'They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk.' The bulk of our lives is a slow jog-trot, and it is harder to keep elasticity, buoyancy, freshness of spirit, in the eventless mill-horse round of our trivial lives than it is in the rarer bursts. Excitement helps us in the one; nothing but dogged principle, and close communion with God, 'mounting on wings as eagles,' will help us in the other. But we may have Him with us in all the arid and featureless levels across which we have to plod, as well as in the height to which we sometimes have

to struggle upwards, or in the depths into which we have sometimes to plunge. If we have the life of Christ within us, then neither the one nor the other will exhaust our energy or darken our spirits.

Lastly, one word as to—

III. The way by which these contrasts can be reconciled, and this likeness secured.

‘They that wait upon the Lord’—that is the whole secret. What does waiting on the Lord include? Let me put it in three brief exhortations. Keep near Him; keep still; expect. If I stray away from Him, I cannot expect His power to come to me. If I fling myself about, in vain impatience, struggling, resisting providences, shirking duties, perturbing my soul, I cannot expect that the peace which brings strength, or the strength which brings peace, will come to me. It must be a windless sea that mirrors the sunshine and the blue, and the troubled heart has not God’s strength in it. If I do not expect to get anything from Him, He will not give me anything; not because He will not, but because He cannot. Take the old Psalmist’s words, ‘I have quieted myself as a weaned child,’ and nestle on the great bosom, and its warmth, its fragrance, its serenity will be granted to you. Keep hold of God’s hand in expectation, in submission, in close union, and the contact will communicate something of His own power. ‘In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.’ The bitter contrasts may all be harmonised, and the miraculous assimilation of humanity to divinity may, in growing measure according to our faith, be realised in us. And though we must still bear the limitations of our present corporeal condition, and though life’s tasks must still oftentimes be felt by us as toils, and life’s burdens as too burden-

some for our feeble shoulders, yet we shall be held up. 'As thy day so shall thy strength be,' and at last, when we mount up further than eagle's wings have ever soared, and look down upon the stars that are 'rolled together as a scroll,' we shall through eternal ages 'run and not be weary' and 'walk and not faint.'

### THE SECRET OF IMMORTAL YOUTH

'Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.'—ISAIAH XL. 30, 31.

I REMEMBER a sunset at sea, where the bosom of each wavelet that fronted the west was aglow with fiery gold, and the back of each turned eastward was cold green; so that, looking on the one hand all was glory, and on the other all was sober melancholy. So differently does life look to you young people and to us older ones. Every man must buy his own experience for himself, and no preaching nor talking will ever make you see life as we see it. It is neither possible nor desirable that you should; but it is both possible and most desirable that you should open your eyes to plain, grave facts, which do not at all depend on our way of looking at things, and that if they be ascertainable, as they are, you should let them shape your lives.

Here are a couple of facts in my text which I ask you to look steadily in the face, and to take account of them, because, if you do so now, it may save you an immense deal of disappointment and sorrow in the days that are to come. You have the priceless prerogative still in your hands of determining what that



future is to be; but you will never use that power rightly if you are guided by illusions, or if, unguided by anything but inclination, you let things drift, and do as you like.

So, then, my object is simply to deal with these two forecasts which my text presents; the one a dreary certainty of weariness and decay, the other a blessed possibility of inexhaustible and incorruptible strength and youth, and on the contrast to build as earnest an appeal to you as I can make.

I. Now, then, look at the first fact here, that of the dreary certainty of weariness and decay.

I do not need to spend much time in talking about that. It is one of the commonplaces which are so familiar that they have lost all power of impression, and can only be rescued from their trivial insignificance by being brought into immediate connection with our own experience. If, instead of the toothless generality, 'the youths shall faint and be weary,' I could get you young people to say, '*I—I* shall faint and be weary, and, as sure as I am living, I shall lose what makes to me the very joy of life at this moment,' I should not have preached in vain.

Of course the words of my text point to the plain fact that all created and physical life, by the very law of its being, in the act of living tends to death; and by the very operation of its strength tends to exhaustion. There are three stages in every creature's life—that of growth, that of equilibrium, that of decay. You are in the first. If you live, it is as certain as fate that you will come to the second and the third. *Your* 'eyes will grow dim,' *your* 'natural force' will be 'abated,' *your* body will become a burden, *your* years that are full of buoyancy will be changed for years of heaviness and

weariness, strength will decay, 'and the young men'—that is *you*—'shall utterly fall.'

And the text points also to another fact, that, long before your natural life shall have begun to tend towards decay, hard work and occasional sorrows and responsibilities and burdens of all sorts will very often make you wearied and ready to faint. In your early days you dream of life as a kind of enchanted garden, full of all manner of delights; and you stand at the threshold with eager eyes and outstretched hands. Ah! dear young friend, long before you have traversed the length of one of its walks, you will often have been sick and tired of the whole thing, and weary of what is laid upon you.

My text points to another fact, as certain as gravitation, that the faintness and weariness and decay of the bodily strength will be accompanied with a parallel change in your feelings. We are drawn onward by hopes, and when we get them fulfilled we find that they are disappointing. Custom, which weighs upon us 'heavy as frost, and deep almost as life,' takes the edge off everything that is delightful, though it does not so completely take away the pain of things that are burdensome and painful. Men travel from a tinted morning into the sober light of common day, and with failing faculties and shattered illusions and dissipated hopes, and powers bending under the long monotony of middle life, most of them live. Now all that is the veriest threadbare morality, and I dare say while I have been speaking, some of you have been thinking that I am repeating platitudes that every old woman could preach. So I am. That is to say, I am trying to put into feeble words the universal human experience. That is *your* experience, and what I want

to get you to think about now is that, as sure as you are living and rejoicing in your youth and strength, this is the fate that is awaiting you—‘the youths shall faint and be weary, and shall utterly fall.’

Well, then, one question: Do you not think that, if that is so, it would be as well to face it? Do you not think that a wise man would take account of all the elements in forecasting his life and would shape his conduct accordingly? If there be something certain to come, it is a very questionable piece of wisdom to make that the thing which we are most unwilling to think about. I do not want to be a kill-joy; I do not want to take anything out of the happy buoyancy of youth. I would say, as even that cynical, bitter Ecclesiastes says, ‘Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth.’ By all means; only take all the facts into account, and if you have joys which shrivel up at the touch of this thought, then the sooner you get rid of such joys the better. If your gladness depends upon your forcibly shutting your eyes to what is inevitably certain to come about, do you not think that you are living in a fool’s paradise that you had better get out of as soon as possible? There is the fact. Will you be a wise and brave man and front it, and settle how you are going to deal with it, or will you let it hang there on your horizon, a thunder-cloud that you do not like to look at, and that you are all the more unwilling to entertain the thought of, because you are so sure that it will burst in storm? Lay this, then, to heart, though it is a dreary certainty, that weariness and decay are sure to be your fate.

II. Now turn, in the next place, to the blessed opposite possibility of inexhaustible and immortal strength.

‘They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.’ The life of nature tends inevitably downward, but there may be another life within the life of nature, which shall have the opposite motion, and tend as certainly upwards. ‘The youths shall faint and be weary’—whether they be Christians or not, the law of decay and fatigue will act upon them; but there may be that within each of us, if we will, which shall resist that law, and have no proclivity whatsoever to extinction in its blaze, to death in its life, to weariness in its effort, and shall be replenished and not exhausted by expenditure. ‘They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,’ and, in all forms of motion possible to a creature they shall expatiate and never tire. So let us look on this blessed possibility a little more closely.

Note, then, how to get at it. ‘They that wait upon the Lord’ is Old Testament dialect for what in New Testament phraseology is meant by ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ For the notion expressed here by ‘waiting’ is that of expectant dependence, and the New Testament ‘faith’ is the very same in its attitude of expectant dependence, while the object of the Old Testament ‘waiting,’ Jehovah, is identical with the object of the New Testament faith, which fastens on God manifest in the flesh, the Man Jesus Christ.

Therefore, I am not diverting the language of my text from its true meaning, but simply opening its depth, when I say that the condition of the inflow of this unwearied and immortal life into our poor, fainting, dying humanity is simply the trust in Jesus Christ the Redeemer of our souls. True, the revela-

tion has advanced; the contents of that which we grasp are more developed and articulate, blessed be God! True, we know more about Jehovah, when we see Him in Jesus Christ, than Isaiah did. True, we have to trust in Him as dying on the Cross for our salvation and as the pattern and example in His humanity of all nobleness and beauty of life for young or old, but the Christ is the 'same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.' And the faith that knit the furthest back of the saints of old to the Jehovah, whom they dimly knew, is in essence identical with the faith that binds my poor sinful heart to the Christ that died and that lives for my redemption and salvation. So, dear brethren, here is the simple old message for each of you, young or old. No matter where we stand on the course of life, there may come into our hearts a Divine Indweller, who laughs at weariness and knows nothing of decay; and He will come if, as sinful men, we turn ourselves to that dear Lord, who fainted and was weary many a time in His humanity, and who now lives, the 'strong Son of God, immortal love,' to make us partakers in His immortality and His strength. The way, then, by which we get this divine gift is by faith in Jesus Christ, which is the expansion, as it was the root, of trust in Jehovah.

Further, what is this strength that we thus get, if we will, by faith? It is the true entrance into our souls of a divine life. God in His Son will come to us, according to His own gracious and profound promise: 'If any man open the door I will enter in.' He will come into our hearts and abide there. He will give to us a life derived from, and therefore, kindred with, His own. And in that connection it is very striking to notice how the prophet, in the context, reiterates

these two words, '*fainteth not, neither is weary.*' He begins by speaking of 'God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, who fainteth not, neither is weary.' He passes on to speak of His gift of power to the faint. He returns to the contrast between the Creator's incorruptible strength and the fleeting power of the strongest and youngest. And then he crowns all with the thought that the same characteristics will mark them in whom the unwearied God dwells, as mark Him. We too, like Him, if we have Christ in our hearts by faith, will share, in some fashion and degree, in His wondrous prerogative of unwearied strength.

So, brethren, here is the promise. God will give Himself to you, and in the very heart of your decaying nature will plant the seed of an immortal being which shall, like His own, shake off fatigue from the limbs, and never tend to dissolution or an end. The life of nature dies by living; the life of grace, which may belong to us all, lives by living, and lives evermore thereby. And so that life is continuous and progressive, with no tendency to decay, nor term to its being. 'The path of the just is as the shining light that shineth more and more,' until it riseth to the zenith of the noontide of the day. Each of you, looking forward to the certain ebbing away of creatural power, to the certain changes that will pass upon you, may say, 'I know that I shall have to leave behind me my present youthful strength, my unworn freshness, my buoyancy, my confidence, my wonder, my hope; but I shall carry my Christ; and in Him I shall possess the secret of an immortal youth.'

The oldest angels are the youngest. The longer men live in fellowship with Christ, the stronger do they

grow. And though our lives, whether we are Christians or no, are necessarily subject to the common laws of mortality, we may carry all that is worth preserving of the earliest stages into the latest; and when grey hairs are upon us, and we are living next door to our graves, we may still have the enthusiasm, the energy, and above all, the boundless hopefulness that made the gladness and the spring of our long-buried youth. 'They shall still bring forth fruit in old age.' 'The youths shall faint and be weary, but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.'

There is one more point to touch, and then I have done, and that is the manner in which this immortal strength is exercised. The latter clauses of my text give us, so to speak, three forms of motion. 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles.' Some good commentators find in this a parallel to the words in the 103rd Psalm, 'My youth is renewed like the eagle's,' and propose to translate it in this fashion, 'They shall cast their plumage like the eagle.' But it seems much more in accordance with the context and the language to adopt substantially the reading of our English version here, or to make the slight change, 'They shall lift up their wings as the eagle,' implying, of course, the steady upward flight towards the light of heaven.

So, then, there are three forms of unwearied strength lying ready for you, young men and women, to take for your very own if you like: strength to soar, strength to run, strength to walk.

There is strength to soar. Old men generally shed their wings, and can only manage to crawl. They have done with romance. Enthusiasms are dead. Sometimes they cynically smile at their own past selves and their dreams. And it is a bad sign when an old

man does that. But for the most part they are content, unless they have got Christ in their hearts, to keep along the low levels, and their soaring days are done. But if you and I have Jesus Christ for the life of our spirits, as certainly as fire sends its shooting tongues upwards, so certainly shall we rise above the sorrows and sins and cares of this 'dim spot which men call earth,' and find an ampler field for buoyant motion high up in communion with God. Strength to soar means the gracious power of bringing all heaven into our grasp, and setting our affections on things above. As the night falls, and joys become fewer and life sterner, and hopes become rarer and more doubtful, it is something to feel that, however straitened may be the ground below, there is plenty of room above, and that, though we are strangers upon earth, we can lift our thoughts yonder. If there be darkness here, still we can 'outsoar the shadow of our night,' and live close to the sun in fellowship with God. Dear brethren, life on earth were too wretched unless it were possible to 'mount up with wings as eagles.'

Again, you may have strength to run—that is to say, there is power waiting for you for all the great crises of your lives which call for special, though it may be brief, exertion. Such crises will come to each of you, in sorrow, work, difficulty, hard conflicts. Moments will be sprung upon you without warning, in which you will feel that years hang on the issue of an instant. Great tasks will be clashed down before you unexpectedly which will demand the gathering together of all your power. And there is only one way to be ready for such times as these, and that is to live waiting on the Lord, near Christ, with Him in your hearts, and then nothing will come that will be too



hard for you. However rough the road, and however severe the struggle, and however swift the pace, you will be able to keep it up. Though it may be with panting lungs and a throbbing heart, and dim eyes and quivering muscles, yet if you wait on the Lord you will run and not be weary. You will be masters of the crises.

Strength to walk may be yours—that is to say, patient power for persistent pursuit of weary, monotonous duty. That is the hardest, and so it is named last. Many a man finds it easy, under the pressure of strong excitement, and for a moment or two, to keep up a swift pace, who finds it very difficult to keep steadily at unexciting work. And yet there is nothing to be done except by doggedly plodding along the dusty road of trivial duties, unhelped by excitement and unwearied by monotony. Only one thing will conquer the disgust at the wearisome round of mill-horse tasks which, sooner or later, seizes all godless men, and that is to bring the great principles of the gospel to bear on them, and to do them in the might and for the sake of the dear Lord. ‘They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk’ along life’s common way in cheerful godliness, ‘and they shall not faint.’

Dear friends, life to us all is, and must be, full of sorrow and of effort. Constant work and frequent sorrows wear us all out, and bring us many a time to the verge of fainting. I beseech you to begin right, and not to add to the other occasions for weariness that of having to retrace, with remorseful heart and ashamed feet, the paths of evil on which you have run. Begin right, which is to say, begin with Christ and take Him for inspiration, for pattern, for guide, for companion. ‘Run with patience the race set before you,

looking unto Jesus the author of your faith, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.'

And if you have Him in your hearts, then, however your creatural power may grow weary, yet because He is with you, 'your shoes shall be iron and brass, and as your days so shall your strength be,' and you may lift up in your turn the glad, triumphant acknowledgment: 'For this cause we faint not, but though our outward man perish, our inward man is renewed day by day.'

God bless you all and make that your experience!

### CHRIST THE ARRESTER OF INCIPIENT EVIL AND THE NOURISHER OF INCIPIENT GOOD

'A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench. . . . He shall not fail nor be discouraged.'—ISAIAH xlii. 3, 4.

THE two metaphors which we have in the former part of these words are not altogether parallel. 'A bruised reed' has suffered an injury which, however, is neither complete nor irreparable. 'Smoking flax,' on the other hand—by which, of course, is meant flax used as a wick in an old-fashioned oil lamp—is partially lit. In the one a process has been begun which, if continued, ends in destruction; in the other, a process has been begun which, if continued, ends in a bright flame. So the one metaphor may refer to the beginnings of evil which may still be averted, and the other the beginnings of incipient and incomplete good. If we keep this distinction in mind, the words of our text gain wonderfully in comprehensiveness.

Then again, it is to be noticed that in the last words of our text, which are separated from the former by a

clause which we omit, we have an echo of these metaphors. The word translated 'fail' is the same as that rendered in the previous verse 'smoking,' or 'dimly burning'; and the word 'discouraged' is the same as that rendered in the previous verse 'bruised.' So then, this 'Servant of the Lord,' who is not to break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax, is fitted for His work, because He Himself has no share in the evils which He would heal, and none in the weaknesses which He would strengthen. His perfect manhood knows no flaws nor bruises; His complete goodness is capable of and needs no increase. Neither outward force nor inward weakness can hinder His power to heal and bless; therefore His work can never cease till it has attained its ultimate purpose. 'He shall not fail nor be discouraged'; shall neither be broken by outward violence, nor shall the flame of His fading energy burn faint until He hath 'set judgment in the earth,' and crowned His purposes with complete success.

We have, then, here set before us three significant representations of the servant of the Lord, which may well commend Him to our confidence and our love. I shall not spend any time in answering the question: Of whom speaketh the prophet this? The answer is plain for us. He speaks of the personal Servant of the Lord, and the personal Servant of the Lord is Jesus Christ our Saviour. I ask you then to come with me while I deal, as simply as may be, with these three ideas that lie before us in this great prophecy.

I. Consider then, first, the representation of the Servant of the Lord as the arrester of incipient ruin.

'He shall not break the bruised reed.' Here is the picture—a slender bulrush, growing by the margin of some tarn or pond; its sides crushed and dented

in by some outward power, a gust of wind, a sudden blow, the foot of a passing animal. The head is hanging by a thread, but it is not yet snapped or broken off from the stem.

But, blessed be God! there emerges from the metaphor not only the solemn thought of the bruises by sin that all men bear, but the other blessed one, that there is no man so bruised as that he is broken; none so injured as that restoration is impossible, no depravity so total but that it may be healed, none so far off but that he may be brought nigh. On no man has sin fastened its venomous claws so deeply but that these may be wrenched away. In none of us has the virus so gone through our veins but that it is capable of being expelled. The reeds are all bruised, the reeds are none of them broken. And so my text comes with its great triumphant hopefulness, and gathers into one mass as capable of restoration the most abject, the most worthless, the most ignorant, the most sensuous, the most godless, the most Christ-hating of the race. Jesus looks on all the tremendous bulk of a world's sins with the confidence that He can move that mountain and cast it into the depths of the sea.

There is a man in Paris that says he has found a cure for that horrible disease of hydrophobia, and who therefore regards the poor sufferers of whom others despair as not beyond the reach of hope. Christ looks upon a world of men smitten with madness, and in whose breasts awful poison is working, with the calm confidence that He carries in His hand an elixir, one drop of which inoculated into the veins of the furious patient will save him from death, and make him whole. 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.' 'He will not break,' and that means He will restore,

‘the bruised reed.’ There are no hopeless outcasts. None of you are beyond the reach of a Saviour’s love, a Saviour’s blood, a Saviour’s healing.

But then the words in my text may be taken in a somewhat narrower sense, applying more particularly to a class. In accordance with other metaphors of Scripture, we may think of ‘the bruised reed’ as expressive of the condition of men whose hearts have been crushed by the consciousness of their sins. ‘The broken and the contrite heart,’ bruised and pulverised, as it were, by a sense of evil, may be typified for us by this bruised reed. And then from the words of my text there emerges the great and blessed hope that such a heart, wholesomely removed from its self-complacent fancy of soundness, shall certainly be healed and bound up by His tender hand. Did you ever see a gardener dealing with some plant, a spray of which may have been wounded? How delicately and tenderly the big, clumsy hand busies itself about the tiny spray, and by stays and bandages brings it into an erect position, and then gives it water and loving care. Just so does Jesus Christ deal with the conscious and sensitive heart of a man who has begun to find out how bad he is, and has been driven away from all his foolish confidence. Christ comes to such an one and restores him, and just because he is crushed deals with him gently, pouring in His consolation. Wheresoever there is a touch of penitence, there is present a restoring Christ.

And the words may be looked at from yet another point of view. We may think of them as representing to us the merciful dealing of the Master with the spirits which are beaten and bruised, sore and wounded, by sorrows and calamities; to whom the Christ comes

in all the tenderness of His gentleness, and lays a hand upon them—the only hand in all the universe that can touch a bleeding heart without hurting it.

Brother and sister suffering from any sorrow, and bleeding from any wound, there is a balm and a physician. There is one hand that will never be laid with blundering kindness or with harshness upon our sore hearts, but whose touch will be healing, and whose presence will be peace.

The Christ who knows our sins and sorrows will not break the bruised reed. The whole race of man may be represented in that parable that came from His own lips, as fallen among thieves that have robbed him and wounded him and left him bruised, but, blessed be God! only 'half dead'; sorely wounded, indeed, but not so sorely but that he may be restored. And there comes One with the wine and the oil, and pours them into the wounds. 'The bruised reed shall He not break.'

II. Now, in the next place, look at the completing thought that is here, in the second clause, which represents Christ as the fosterer of incipient and imperfect good.

'The dimly-burning wick He shall not quench.' A process, as I have said, is begun in the smoking flax, which only needs to be carried on to lead to a brilliant flame. That represents for us not the beginnings of a not irreparable evil, but the commencement of very dim and imperfect good. Now, then, who are represented by this 'smoking flax'? You will not misunderstand me, nor think that I am contradicting what I have already been saying, if I claim for this second metaphor as wide a universality as the former, and say that in all men, just because the process of

evil and the wounds from it are not so deep and complete as that restoration is impossible, therefore is there something in their nature which corresponds to this dim flame that needs to be fostered in order to blaze brightly abroad. There is no man out of hell but has in him something that needs but to be brought to sovereign power in his life in order to make him a light in the world. You have consciences at the least; you have convictions, you know you have, which if you followed them out would make Christians of you straight away. You have aspirations after good, desires, some of you, after purity and nobleness of living, which only need to be raised to the height and the dominance in your lives which they ought to possess, in order to revolutionise your whole course. There is a spark in every man which, fanned and cared for, will change him from darkness into light. Fanned and cared for it needs to be, and fanned and cared for it can only be by a divine power coming down upon it from without. This second metaphor of my text, as truly as the other, belongs to every soul of man upon the earth. He from whom all sparks and light have died out is not a man but a devil. And for all of us the exhortation comes: 'Thou hast a voice within testifying to God and to duty'; listen to it and care for it.

Then again, dear brethren, in a narrower way, the words may be applied to a class. There are some of us who have in us a little spark, as we believe, of a divine life, the faint beginnings of a Christian character. We call ourselves Christ's disciples. We are; but oh! how dimly the flax burns. They say that where there is smoke there is fire. There is a great deal more smoke than fire in the most of Christian people in this generation, and if it were not for such thoughts as this of

my text about that dear Christ who will not lay a hasty hand upon some little tremulous spark, and by one rash movement extinguish it for ever, there would be but small hope for a great many of us.

Whether, then, the dimly-burning wick be taken to symbolise the lingering remains of a better nature which still abides with all sinful men, yet capable of redemption, or whether it be taken to mean the low and imperfect and inconsistent and feeble Christianity of us professing Christians, the words of my text are equally blessed and equally true. Christ will neither despise, nor so bring down His hand upon it as to extinguish, the feeblest spark. Look at His life on earth, think how He bore with those blundering, foolish, selfish disciples of His; how patient the divine Teacher was with their slow learning of His meaning and catching of His character. Remember how, when a man came to Him with a very imperfect goodness, the Evangelist tells us that Jesus, beholding him, loved him. And take out of these blessed stories this great hope, that howsoever small men 'despise the day of small things,' the Greatest does not; and howsoever men may say 'Such a little spark can never be kindled into flame, the fire is out, you may as well let it alone,' He never says that, but by patient teaching and fostering and continual care and wise treatment will nourish and nurture it until it leaps into a blaze.

How do you make 'smoking flax' burn? You give it oil, you give it air, and you take away the charred portions. And Christ will give you, in your feebleness, the oil of His Spirit, that you may burn brightly as one of the candlesticks in His Temple; and He will let air in, and sometimes take away the charred por-



tions by the wise discipline of sorrow and trial, in order that the smoking flax may become a shining light. But by whatsoever means He may work, be sure of this, that He will neither despise nor neglect the feeblest inclination of good after Him, but will nourish it to perfection and to beauty.

The reason why so many Christian men's Christian light is so fuliginous and dim is just that they keep away from Jesus Christ. 'Abide in Me and I in you.' 'As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.' How can the Temple lamps burn bright unless the Priest of the Temple tends them? Keep near Him that His hand may nourish your smoking dimness into a pure flame, leaping heavenward and illuminating your lives.

III. And now, lastly, we have here the representation of the servant of the Lord's exemption from human evil and weakness, as the foundation of His restoring and fostering work.

'He shall not burn dimly nor be broken till He hath set judgment in the earth.' There are no bruises in this reed; that is to say, Christ's manhood is free from all scars and wounds of evil or of sin. There is no dimness in this light, that is to say, Christ's character is perfect, His goodness needs no increase. There is no trace of effort in His holiness, no growth manifest in His God-likeness, from the beginning to the end. There is no outward violence that can be brought to bear upon Him that will stay Him in His purpose. There is no inward failure of strength in Him that may lead us to fear that His work shall not be completed. And because of these things, because of His perfect exemption from human infirmity, because in

Him was no sin, He is manifested to take away our sins. Because in Him there was goodness incapable of increase, being perfect from the beginning, therefore He is manifested to make us participants of His own unalterable and infinite goodness and purity. Because no outward violence, no inward weakness, can ever stay His course, nor make Him abandon His purpose, therefore His gospel looks upon the world with boundless hopefulness, with calm triumph; will not hear of there being any outcast and irreclaimable classes; declares it to be a blasphemy against God and Christ to say that any men or any nations are incapable of receiving the gospel and of being redeemed by it, and comes with supreme love and a calm consciousness of infinite power to you, my brother, in your deepest darkness, in your moods most removed from God and purity, and assures you that it will heal you, and will raise all that in you is feeble to its own strength. Every man may pray to that strong Christ who fails not nor is discouraged—

‘What in me is dark  
Illumine; what is low, raise and support,’

in the confidence that He will hear and answer. If you do that you will not do it in vain, but His gentle hand laid upon you will heal the bruises that sin has made. Out of your weakness, as of ‘a reed shaken with the wind,’ the Restorer will make a pillar of marble in the Temple of His God. And out of your smoking dimness and wavering light, a spark at the best, almost buried in the thick smoke that accompanies it, the fostering Christ will make a brightness which shall flame as the perfect light that ‘shineth more and more unto the noontide of the day.’

## THE BLIND MAN'S GUIDE

I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not ; I will lead them in paths that they have not known : I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them.'—ISAIAH xlii. 16.

THE grand stormy verses before these words, with all their dread array of natural convulsions, have one object—the tender guidance promised in the text. So we have the combination of terror and love, the blending in the divine government of terrible judgments and most gentle guidance. The words apply, of course, primarily to the redemption of Israel; but through them shines a picture of the greater redemption of humanity.

1. The blind travellers. They are blind, and their road is unknown to them. It is a symbol of our condition and of our paths in life. Our limited foresight cannot discern certainly even the next moment. It is always the unexpected that happens. We cannot tell what lies behind the next bend in the road, and there are so many bends; and behind one of them, we cannot tell whether it may be the next, sits 'the Shadow feared of man.' Life is like the course of the Congo, which makes so mighty a bend northward that, till it had been followed from source to mouth, no one could have supposed that it was to enter the ocean far away to the west. Not only God's mercies, but our paths, are 'new every morning.' Experience, like conscience, sheds light mainly on what lies behind, and scarcely 'doth attain to something of prophetic strain.'

2. The Leader. How tenderly God makes Himself the leader of the blind pilgrims! It does not matter

about being blind, if we put our hands in His. Then He will 'be to us instead of eyes.' Jesus took the blind man by the hand.

So here is the promise of guidance by Providence, Word, Spirit. And here is the condition of receiving it, namely, our conscious blindness and realisation of the complexities of life, leading to putting ourselves into His hands in docile faith.

3. The gradual light. Darkness is made light. We receive the knowledge of each step, when it needs to be taken; the light shines only on the next; we are like men in a fog, who are able only to see a yard ahead.

4. The clearing away of hindrances. 'Crooked things straight.' A careful guide lifts stones out of a blind man's way. How far is this true? There will be plenty of crooked things left crooked, but still so many straightened as to make our road passable.

5. The perpetual Presence. If God is with me, then all these blessings will surely be mine. He will be with me if I keep myself with Him. It is His felt presence that gives me light on the road, and levels and straightens out the crookedest and roughest path.

### THY NAME: MY NAME

'I have called thee by thy name.'—ISAIAH xliii. 1.

'Every one that is called by My name.'—ISAIAH xliii. 7.

GREAT stress is laid on names in Scripture. These two parallel and antithetic clauses bring out striking complementary relations between God and the collective Israel. But they are as applicable to each individual member of the true Israel of God.

I. What does God's calling a man by his name imply?

1. Intimate knowledge.

Adam naming the creatures.

Christ naming His disciples.

2. Loving friendship.

Moses, 'I know thee by name, and thou hast found grace in my sight.'

3. Designation and adaptation to work.

Bezaleel—Exodus xxxi. 2; Cyrus—Isaiah xlv. 3; Servant of the Lord—Isaiah xlix. 1.

II. What does God's calling a man by His name imply?

1. God's possession of him. That possession by God involves God's protection and man's safety. He does not hold His property slackly. 'None shall pluck them out of My Father's hand.'

2. Kindred. The man bears the family name. He is adopted into the household. The sonship of the receiver of the new name is dimly shadowed.

3. Likeness.

The Biblical meaning of 'name' is 'character manifested.'

Nomen and omen coincide.

We must bring into connection with the texts the prominence given in the Apocalypse to analogous promises.

'I will write on him the name of My God.' That means a fuller disclosing of God's character, and a clear impress of that character on perfected men. 'His name shall be in their foreheads.'

## JACOB—ISRAEL—JESHURUN

Yet now hear, O Jacob My servant ; and Israel, whom I have chosen. . . . Fear not, O Jacob, My servant ; and thou, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.'—ISAIAH xliv. 1, 2.

YOU observe that there are here three different names applied to the Jewish nation. Two of them, namely Jacob and Israel, were borne by their great ancestor, and by him transmitted to his descendants. The third was never borne by him, and is applied to the people only here and in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The occurrence of all three here is very remarkable, and the order in which they stand is not accidental. The prophet begins with the name that belonged to the patriarch by birth ; the name of nature, which contained some indications of character. He passes on to the name which commemorated the mysterious conflict where, as a prince, Jacob had power with God and prevailed. He ends with the name Jeshurun, of which the meaning is 'the righteous one,' and which was bestowed upon the people as a reminder of what they ought to be.

Now, as I take it, the occurrence of these names here, and their sequence, may teach us some very important lessons ; and it is simply to these lessons, and not at all to the context, that I ask your attention.

I. I take, then, these three names in their order as teaching us, first, the path of transformation.

Every 'Jacob' may become a 'righteous one,' if he will tread Jacob's road. We start with that first name of nature which, according to Esau's bitter etymology of it, meant 'a supplanter'—not without some suggestions of craft and treachery in it. It is descriptive of

the natural disposition of the patriarch, which was by no means attractive. Cool, calculating, subtle, with a very keen eye to his own interests, and not at all scrupulous as to the means by which he secured them, he had no generous impulses, and few unselfish affections. He told lies to his poor old blind father, he cheated his brother, he met the shiftiness of Laban with equal shiftiness. It was 'diamond cut diamond' all through. He tried to make a bargain with God Himself at Bethel, and to lay down conditions on which he would bring Him the tenth of his substance. And all through his earlier career he does not look like the stuff of which heroes and saints are made.

But in the mid-path of his life there came that hour of deep dejection and helplessness, when, driven out of all dependence on self, and feeling round in his agony for something to lay hold upon, there came into his nightly solitude a vision of God. In conscious weakness, and in the confidence of self-despair, he wrestled with the mysterious Visitant in the only fashion in which He can be wrestled with. 'He wept and made supplication to Him,' as one of the prophets puts it, and so he bore away the threefold gift—blessing from those mighty lips whose blessing is the communication, and not only the invocation, of mercy, a deeper knowledge of that divine and mysterious Name, and for himself a new name.

That new name implied a new direction given to his character.

Hitherto he had wrestled with men whom he would supplant, for his own advantage, by craft and subtlety; henceforward he strove with God for higher blessings, which, in striving, he won. All the rest of his life was on a loftier plane. Old ambitions were dead within

him, and though the last of these names in our text was never actually borne by him, he began to deserve it, and grew steadily in nobleness and beauty of character until the end, when he sang his swan-song and lay down to die, with thanksgiving for the past and glowing prophecies for the future, pouring from his trembling lips.

And now, brethren, that is the outline of the only way in which, from out of the evil and the sinfulness of our natural disposition, any of us can be raised to the loftiness and purity of a righteous life. There must be a Peniel between the two halves of the character, if there is to be transformation.

Have you ever been beaten out of all your confidence, and ground down into the dust of self-disgust and self-abandonment? Have you ever felt, 'there is nothing in me or about me that I can cling to or rely upon'? Have you ever in the thickest of that darkness had, gleaming in upon your solitude, the vision of His face, whose face we see in Jesus Christ? Have you ever grasped Him who is infinitely willing to be held by the weakest hand, and who never 'makes as though He would go further,' except in order to induce us to say, with deeper earnestness of desire, 'Abide with us, for it is dark'? And have you ever, in fellowship with Him thus, found pouring into your enlightened mind a deeper reading of the meaning of His character and a fuller conception of the mystery of His love? And have you ever—certainly you have if these things have preceded it, certainly you have not if they have not—have you ever thereby been borne up on to a higher level of feeling and life, and been aware of new impulses, hopes, joys, new directions and new capacities budding and blossoming in your spirit?



Brethren! there is only one way by which, out of the mire and clay of earth, there can be formed a fair image of holiness, and that is, that Jacob's experience, in deeper, more inward, more wonderful form, should be repeated in each one of us; and that thus, penitent and yet hopeful, we should behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and draw from Him our righteousness. That is the path of transformation. The road passes through Peniel, and Jacob must become Israel before he is Jeshurun. He must hold communion with God in Christ before he is clothed with righteousness.

How different that path is from the road which men are apt to take in working out their own self-improvement! How many forms of religion, and how many toiling souls put the cart before the horse, and in effect just reverse the process, and say practically—'first make yourselves righteous, and then you will have communion with God'! That is an endless and a hopeless task. I have no doubt that some of you have spent—and I would not say wasted, but it has been almost so—years of life, not without many an honest effort, in the task of self-improvement, and are very much where you were long ago. Why have you failed? Because you have never been to Peniel. You have never seen the face of God in Christ. You have not received from Him the blessing, even righteousness, from the God of your salvation.

Dear friends, give up treading that endless, weary path of vain effort; and learn—oh! learn—that the righteousness which makes a soul pure and beautiful must come as a gift from God, and is given only in Jesus Christ.

This sequence too, I think, may very fairly be used

to teach us the lesson that there is no kind of character so debased but that it may partake of the purifying and ennobling influence. All the Jacobs may be turned into righteous ones, however crafty, however subtle, however selfish, however worldly they are. Christianity looks at no man and says, 'That is too bad a case for me to deal with.' It will undertake any and every case, and whoever will take its medicines can be cured 'of whatsoever disease he had.'

To all of us, no matter what our past may have been, this blessed message comes: 'There is hope for thee, if thou wilt use these means.' Only remember, the road from the depths of evil to the heights of purity always lies through Peniel. You must have power with God and draw a blessing from Him, and hold communion with Him, before you can become righteous.

How do they print photographs? By taking sensitive paper, and laying it, in touch with the negative, in the sun. Lay your spirits on Christ, and keep them still, touching Him, in the light of God, and that will turn you into His likeness. That, and nothing else will do it.

II. And now there is a second lesson from the occurrence of these three names, viz., here we may find expressed the law for the Christian life.

There are some religious people that seem to think that it is enough if only they can say; 'Well! I have been to Jesus Christ and I have got my past sins forgiven; I have been on the mountain and have held communion with God; I do know what it is to have fellowship with Him, in many an hour of devout communion,' and who are in much danger of treating the further stage of simple, practical righteousness as of

secondary importance. Now the order of these names here points the lesson that the apex of the pyramid, the goal of the whole course, is—Righteousness. The object for which the whole majestic structure of Revelation has been builded up, is simply to make good men and women. God does not tell us His Name merely in order that we may know His Name, but in order that, knowing it, we may be smitten with the love of it, and so may come into the likeness of it. There is no religious truth which is given men for the sake of clearing their understandings and enlightening their minds only. We get the truth to enlighten our minds and to clear our understandings in order that thereby, as becomes reasonable men with heads on our shoulders, we may let our principles guide our conduct. Conduct is the end of principle, and all Revelation is given to us in order that we may be pure and good men and women.

For the same end all God's mercy of forgiveness and deliverance from guilt and punishment in Jesus Christ is given to you, not merely in order that you may escape the penalties of your evil, but in order that, being pardoned, you may in glad thankfulness be lifted up into an enthusiasm of service which will make you eager to serve Him and long to be like Him. He sets you free from guilt, from punishment, and His wrath, in order that by the golden cord of love you may be fastened to Him in thankful obedience. God's purpose in redemption is that 'we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies should serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.'

And in like manner, righteousness, by which, in the present connection, we mean simply the doing of the things, and the being the character, which a conscience

enlightened by the law of God dictates to us to be and to do—righteousness is the intention and the aim of all religious emotion and feeling. It is all very well to have the joy of fellowship with God in our inmost soul, but there is a type of Christianity which is a great deal stronger on the side of devout emotion than on the side of transparent godliness; and although it becomes no man to say what Jesus Christ could say to those whose religion is mainly emotional, ‘Hypocrites!’ it is the part of every honest preacher to warn all that listen to him that there does lie a danger, a very real danger, very close to some of us, to substitute devout emotion for plain, practical goodness, and to be a great deal nearer God in the words of our prayers than we are in the current and set of our daily lives. Take, then, these three names of my text as flashing into force and emphasis the exhortation that the crown of all religion is righteousness, and as preaching, in antique guise, the same lesson that the very Apostle of affectionate contemplation uttered with such earnestness:—‘Little children! let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous.’ An ounce of practical godliness is worth a pound of fine feeling and a ton of correct orthodoxy. Remember what the Master said, and take the lesson in the measure in which you need it: ‘Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out devils, and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from Me.’ And the proof that I never knew you, nor you Me, is: ‘Ye that work iniquity.’

III. Then there is another lesson still which I draw

from these words, viz. the merciful judgment which God makes of the character of them that love Him.

Jeshurun means 'the righteous one.' How far beneath the ideal of the name these Jewish people fell we all know, and yet the name is applied to them. Although the realisation of the ideal has been so imperfect, the ideal is not destroyed. Although they have done so many sins, yet He calls them by His name of 'righteous.' And so we Christian people find that the New Testament calls us 'saints.' That name is not applied to some select and lofty specimens of Christianity, but to all Christians, however imperfect their present life and character may be. Then people sneer and say, 'Ah! a strange kind of saints these Christians are! Do you think that a man can condone practical immorality by saying that he is trusting in Jesus Christ? The Church's "saint" seems to mean less than the world's "man of honour."' God forbid that it should be fancied that Christian sainthood is more tolerant of evil than worldly morality, or has any fantastic standard of goodness which makes up for departures from the plain rule of right by prayers and raptures. But surely there may be a principle of action deep down at the bottom of a heart, very feeble in its present exercise and manifestation, which yet is the true man, and is destined to conquer the whole nature which now wars against it. Here, for instance, is a tiny spark, and there is a huge pile of damp, green wood. Yes; and the little spark will turn all the wood into flame, if you give it time and fair play. The leaven may be hid in an immensely greater mass of meal, but it, and not the three measures of flour, is the active principle. And if there is in a man, overlaid by ever so many absurdities, and contradictions,

and inconsistencies, a little seed of faith in Jesus Christ, there will be in him proportionately a little particle of a divine life which is omnipotent, which is immortal, which will conquer and transform all the rest into its own likeness; and He who sees not as men see, beholds the inmost tendencies and desires of the nature, as well as the facts of the life, and discerning the inmost and true self of His children, and knowing that it will conquer, calls us 'righteous ones,' even while the outward life has not yet been brought into harmony with the new man, created in righteousness after God's image.

All wrong-doing is inconsistent with Christianity, but, thank God, it is not for us to say that *any* wrong-doing is incompatible with it; and therefore, for ourselves there is hope, and for our estimate of one another there ought to be charity, and for all Christian people there is the lesson—live up to your name. *Noblesse oblige!* Fulfil your ideal. Be what God calls you, and 'press toward the mark for the prize.'

If one had time to deal with it, there is another lesson naturally suggested by these names, but I only put it in a sentence and leave it; and that is the union between the founder of the nation and the nation. The name of the patriarch passes to his descendants, the nation is called after him that begat it. In some sense it prolongs his life and spirit and character upon the earth. That is the old-world way of looking at the solidarity of a nation. There is a New Testament fact which goes even deeper than that. The names which Christ bears are given to Christ's followers. Is He a King, is He a Priest? He 'makes us kings and priests.' Is He anointed the Messiah? God 'hath anointed us in Him.' Is He the Light of the World?

‘Ye are the lights of the world.’ His life passeth into all that love Him in the measure of their trust and love. We are one with Jesus if we rest upon Him; one in life, one in character, approximating by slow degrees, but surely, to His likeness; and blessed be His name! one in destiny. Then, my friend, if you will only keep near that Lord, trust Him, live in the light of His face, go to Him in your weakness, in your despair, in your self-abandonment; wrestle with Him, with the supplication and the tears that He delights to receive, then you will be knit to Him in a union so real and deep that all which is His shall be yours, His life shall be the life of your spirit, His power the strength of your life, His dominion the foundation of your dignity as a prince with God, His all-prevailing priesthood the security that your prayer shall have power, and the spotless robe of His righteousness the fine linen, clean and white, in which arrayed, you shall be found of Him, and in Him at last, in peace, ‘not having your own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.’

## FEEDING ON ASHES

‘He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?’—ISAIAH xlv. 20.

THE prophet has been pouring fierce scorn on idolaters. They make, he says, the gods they worship. They take a tree and saw it up: one log serves for a fire to cook their food, and with compass and pencil and plane they carve the figure of a man, and then they bow down to it and say, ‘Deliver me, for thou

art my god!’ He sums up the whole in this sentence of my text, in which the tone changes from bitter irony to astonished pity. Now, if this were the time and the place, one would like to expand and illustrate the deep thoughts in these words in reference to idolatry; thoughts which go dead in the teeth of a great deal that is now supposed to be scientifically established, but which may be none the more true for all that. He asserts that idolatry is empty, a feeding on ashes. He declares, in opposition to modern ideas, that the low, gross forms of polytheism and idol-worship are a departure from a previous higher stage, whereas to-day we are told by a hundred voices that all religion begins at the bottom, and slowly struggles up to the top. Isaiah says the very opposite. The pure form is the primitive; the secondary form is the gross, which is a corruption. They tell us too, nowadays, that all religion pursues a process of evolution, and gradually clears itself of its more imperfect and carnal elements. Isaiah says, ‘he cannot deliver his soul’; and no religion ever worked itself up, unless under the impulse of a revelation from without. That is Isaiah’s philosophy of idolatry, and I expect it will be accepted as the true one some day.

But my text has a wider bearing. It not only describes, in pathetic language, the condition of the idolater, but it is true about all lives, which are really idolatrous in so far as they make anything else than God their aim and their joy. Every word of this text applies to such lives—that is to say, to the lives of a good many people listening to me now. And I would fain try to lay the truths here on some hearts. Let me just take them as they lie in the words before us.



I. A life that substantially ignores God is empty of all true satisfaction.

‘He feedeth on ashes’! Very little imagination will realise the force of that picture. The gritty cinders will irritate the lips and tongue, will dry up the moisture of the mouth, will interfere with the breathing, and there will be no nourishment in a sackful of them.

Dear brethren, the underlying truth is this—God is the only food of a man’s soul. You pick up the skeleton of a bird upon a moor; and if you know anything about osteology—the science of bones—you will see, in the very make of its breast-bone and its wing-bones, the declaration that its destiny was to soar into the blue. You pick up the skeleton of a fish lying on the beach, and you will see in its very form and characteristics that its destiny is to expatiate in the depths of the sea. And, written on you, as distinctly as flight on the bird, or swimming on the fish, is this, that you are meant, by your very make, to soar up into the heights of the glory of God, and to plunge deep into the abysses of His infinite love and wisdom. Man is made for God. ‘Whose image and superscription hath it?’ said Christ. The coin belongs to the king whose head and titles are displayed upon it; and on your heart, friend, though a usurper has tried to recoin the piece, and put his own foul image on the top of the original one, is stamped deep that you belong to the King of kings, to God Himself.

For what does our heart want? A perfect, changeless, all-powerful love. And what does our mind want? Reliable, guiding, inexhaustible, and yet accessible truth. And what does our will want? Commandments which have an authoritative ring in

their very utterance, and which will serve for infallible guides for our lives. And what do our weak, sinful natures want? Something that shall free our consciences, and shall deliver us from the burden of our transgressions, and shall calm our fears, and shall quicken and warrant our lofty hopes. And what do men whose destiny is to live for ever want but something that shall go with them through all changes of condition, and, like a light in the midst of the darkest tunnel, shall burn in the passage between this and the other world, and shall never be taken away from them? We want a Person to be everything to us. No accumulation of things will satisfy a man. And we want all our treasures to be in one Person, and we need that that Person shall live as long as we live, and as long as we need shall be sufficient to supply us. And all this is only the spelling in many letters of the one name—God. That is what we want, that, and nothing less.

Then the next step that I suggest to you is, that where a man will take God for the food of his spirit, and turn love and mind and will and conscience and practical life to Him, seeing Him in everything, and seeing all things in Him; saturating, as it were, the universe with the thought of God, and recreating his own spirit with communion of friendship to Him; to that man lower goods do first disclose their real sweetness, their most poignant delight, and their most solid satisfaction. To say of a world where God has set us, that it is all 'vanity and vexation of spirit,' goes in flat contradiction to what He said when, creation finished, He looked upon His world, and proclaimed to the waiting seraphim around that 'it was very good.' There is a view of the world which calls itself pious, but is really

an insult to God ; and the irreligious pessimism that is fashionable nowadays, as if human life were a great mistake, and everything were mean and poor and insufficient, is contrary to the facts and to the consciousness of every man. But if you make things first which were meant to be second, then you make what was meant to be food 'ashes.' They are all good in their place. Wealth is good ; wisdom is good ; success is good ; love is good. And all these things may be enjoyed without God, and will each of them yield their proportional satisfaction to the part of our nature to which they belong. But if you put them first you degrade them ; a change passes over them at once. A long row of cyphers means nothing ; put a significant digit in front of it, and it means millions. Take away the digit, and it goes back to nothing again. The world, and all its fading sweets, if you put God in the forefront of it, and begin the series with Him, is sweet, though it may be fleeting, and is meant to be felt by us as such. But if you take away Him, it is a row of cyphers signifying nothing, and able to contribute nothing to the real, deepest necessities of the human soul. And so the old question comes—' Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread ? ' It is bread, if only you will remember first that God is the food of your souls. But if you try to nourish yourselves on it alone, then, as I said, a sackful of such ashes will not stay your appetite. Oh ! brethren, God has not so blundered in making the world that He has surrounded us with things that are all lies, but He has so made it that whosoever flies in the face of the gracious commandment which is also an invitation, ' Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness,' has not only no security that the

‘other things’ shall ‘be added unto him,’ but has the certainty that though they were added to him, in degree beyond his dreams and highest hopes, they would avail nothing to satisfy the hunger of his heart. As George Herbert puts it—

‘Shadows well mounted, dreams in a career,  
Embroidered lies, nothing between two dishes,  
These are the pleasures here.’

‘He feedeth on ashes,’ because he does not take God for the food of his soul.

II. So, secondly, notice that a life which thus ignores God is tragically unaware of its own emptiness.

‘A deceived heart hath turned him aside.’ That explains how the man comes to fancy that ashes are food. His whole nature is perverted, his vision distorted, his power of judgment marred. He is given over to hallucinations and illusions and dreams.

That explains, too, why men persist in this feeding on ashes after all experience. There is no fact stranger or more tragical in our histories than that we do not learn by a thousand failures that the world will not avail to make us restful and blessed. You will see a dog chasing a sparrow,—it has chased hundreds before and never caught one. Yet, when the bird rises from the ground, away it goes after it once more, with eager yelp and rush, to renew the old experience. Ah! that is like what a great many of you are doing, and you have not the same excuse that the dog has. You have been trying all your lives—and some of you have grey hairs on your heads—to slake your thirst by dipping leaky buckets into empty wells, and you are at it yet. As some one says, ‘experience throws a light on the wave behind us,’ but it

does very little to fling a light on the sea before us. Experience confirms my text, for I venture to put it to the experience of every man—how many moments of complete satisfaction and rest can you summon up in your memory as having been yours in the past? ‘He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.’ Appetite always grows faster than supply. And so, though we have tried them in vain so often, we turn again to the old discredited sources, and fancy we shall do better this time. Is it not strange? Is there any explanation of it, other than that of my text? ‘A deceived heart hath turned him aside.’

And that deceived heart, stronger than experience, is also stronger than conscience. Do you not know that you ought to be Christians? Do you not know that it is both wrong and foolish of you to ignore God? Do you not know that you will have to answer for it? Have you not had moments of illumination when there has risen up before you the whole vanity of your past lives, and when you have felt ‘I have played the fool, and erred exceedingly’? And yet, what has come of it all with some of you? Why, what comes of it with the drunkard in the Book of Proverbs, who, as soon as he has got over the bruises and the sickness of his last debauch, says, ‘I will seek it yet again.’ ‘A deceived heart hath turned him aside.’

And how is it that this hallucination that you have fed full and been satisfied, when all the while your hunger has not been appeased, can continue to act on us? For the very plain reason that every one of us has in himself a higher and a lower self, a set of desires for the grosser, more earthly, and, using the word in

its proper sense, worldly sort—that is to say, directed towards material things, and a higher set which look right up to God if they were allowed fair play. And of these two sets—which really are one at bottom, if a man would only see it—the lower gets the upper hand, and suppresses the higher and the nobler. And so in many a man and woman the longing for God is crushed out by the grosser delights of sense.

One sometimes hears of cowardly, unmanly sailors, who in shipwreck push the women and children aside, and struggle to the boats. And there are in all of us groups of sturdy mendicants, so to speak, who elbow their way to the front, and will have their wants satisfied. What becomes of the gentler group that stand behind, unnoticed and silent? It is an awful thing when men and women do, as so many of us do, pervert the tastes that are meant to lead them to God, in order to stifle the consciousness that they need a God at all. There are tribes of low savages who are known as ‘clay-eaters.’ That is what a great many of us are; we feed upon the serpent’s meat, the dust of the earth, and let all the higher heavenly food, which addresses itself first to loftier desires, but also satisfies these lower ones, stand unnoticed, unsought for, unpartaken of. Dear friends, do not be befooled by that treacherous heart of yours, but let the deepest voices in your soul be heard. Understand, I beseech you, that their cry is for no created person or thing, and that only God Himself can satisfy them.

III. And now, lastly, notice that a life thus ignoring God needs a power from without to set it free.

‘He cannot deliver his soul.’ Can you? Do you think you can break the habits of a lifetime? Do you think that, left to yourself, you would ever have any

inclination to break them? Certainly, left to yourselves, you will never have the power. These long indulged appetites of ours grow with indulgence; and that which first was light as a cobweb, and soft as a silken bracelet, becomes heavier and solider until it is an iron fetter upon the limb, which no man can break. There is nothing more awful in life than the influence of habit, so unthinkingly acquired, so inexorably certain, so limiting our possibilities and enclosing us in its grip.

Dear brethren, there is something more wanted than yourselves to break this chain. You have tried, I have no doubt, in the course of your lives, more and more resolutely, to cure yourselves of some more or less unworthy habits. They may be but mere slight tricks of attitude or intonation, or movement. Has your success been such as to encourage you to think that you can revolutionise your lives, and dethrone the despots that have ruled over you in the past? I leave the question to yourselves. To me it seems that the world of men is certain to go on ignoring God, and seeking its delight only in the world of creatures, unless there comes in an outside power into the heart of the world and revolutionises all things.

It is that power that I have to preach, the Christ who is the 'Bread of God that came down from Heaven,' who can lift up any soul from the most obstinate and long-continued grovelling amongst the transitory things of this limited world, and the superficial delights of sense and a gratified bodily life; who can bring the forgiveness which is essential, the deliverance from the power of evil which is not less essential, and who can fill our hearts with Himself the food of the world. He comes to each of us; He comes to you,

with the old unanswerable question upon His lips, 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not?' It is unanswerable, for you can give no reason sufficient for such madness. All that you could say, and you durst not say it to Him, is, 'a deceived heart hath turned me aside.' He comes with the old gracious word upon His lips, 'Take! eat! this is My body which is broken for you.' He offers us Himself. He can stay all the hungers of all mankind. He can feed your heart with love, your mind with truth which is Himself, your will with His sweet commands.

As of old He made the thousands sit down upon the grass, and they did all eat and were filled, so He stands before the world to-day and says, 'I am the Bread of Life; He that cometh to Me shall never hunger.' And if you will only come to Him—that is to say, will trust yourselves altogether to the merits of His sacrifice, and the might of His indwelling Spirit—He will take away all the taste for the leeks and onions and garlic, and will give you the appetite for heavenly food. He will spread for you a table in the wilderness, and what would else be ashes will become sweet, wholesome, and nourishing. Nor will He cease there, for in His own good time He will call us to the banqueting house above, where He will make us to sit down to meat, and come forth Himself and serve us. Here, hunger often brings pain, and eating is followed by repletion. But there, appetite and satisfaction will produce each other perpetually, and the blessed ones who then hunger will not hunger so as to feel faintness or emptiness, nor be so filled as to cease to desire larger portions of the Bread of God. I beseech you, cry, 'Lord, ever more give us this bread!'



## WRITING BLOTTED OUT AND MIST MELTED

'I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins.'—ISAIAH XLIV. 22.

ISAIAH has often and well been called the Evangelical Prophet. Many parts of this second half of his prophecies referring to the Messiah read like history rather than prediction. But it is not only from the clearness with which the great figure of the future king of Israel stands out on his page that he deserves that title. Other thoughts belonging to the very substance of the gospel appear in him with a vividness and a frequency which well warrants its application to him. He speaks much of the characteristically Christian conceptions of sin, forgiveness, and redemption. The whole of the latter parts of this book are laden with that burden. They are gathered up in the extraordinarily pregnant and blessed words of my text, in which metaphors are blended with much disregard to oratorical propriety, in order to bring out the whole fulness of the prophet's meaning. 'I have blotted out'—that suggests a book. 'I have blotted out as a cloud'—that suggests the thinning away of morning mists. The prophet blends the two thoughts together, and on that great revelation of a forgiveness granted before it has been asked, and given, not only to one penitent soul wailing out like the abased king of Israel in his deep contrition, 'according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions,' but promised to a whole people, is rested the great invitation, 'Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.'

Let me try and bring out, as simply and earnestly as

I can, the great teaching that is condensed into these words.

I. Observe here the penetrating glance into the very essential characteristics of all sin.

There are two words, as you see, employed in my text, 'transgressions' and 'sins.' They apply to the same kind of actions, but they look at them from different angles and points of view. They are partially synonymous, but they cover very various conceptions, and if we take note of the original significations of the two words, we get two very important and often forgotten thoughts.

For that expression rendered in my text, and rendered correctly enough—transgressions—means at bottom, 'rebellion,' the rising up of a disobedient will, not only against a law, but against a lawgiver. There we have a deepening of that solemn fact of a man's wrongdoing, which brings it into immediate connection with God, and marks its foulness by reason of that connection.

Ah! brethren, it makes all the difference to a man's notions of right and wrong, whether he stops on the surface or goes down to the depths; whether he says to himself, 'The thing is a vice; it is wrong; it is contrary to what I ought to be'; or whether he gets down to the darker, deeper, and truer thought, and says, 'The damnable thing about every little evil that I do is this, that in it *I*—poor puny *I*—perk myself up against God, and say to Him, "Thou wilt; wilt thou? *I* shall not!"' Sin is rebellion.

And so what becomes of the hazy distinction between great sins and little ones? An overt act of rebellion is of the same gravity, whatsoever may be its form. The man that lifts his sword against the

sovereign, and the man behind him that holds his horse, are equally criminal. And when once you let in the notion that in all our actions we have to do with a Person, to whom we are bound to be obedient, then the distinction which sophisticates so many people's consciences, and does such infinite harm in so many lives, between great and small transgressions, disappears altogether. Sin is rebellion.

Then the other word of my text is equally profound and significant. For it, literally taken, means—as the words for 'sin' do in other languages besides the Hebrew—missing a mark. Every wrong thing that any man does is beside the mark, at which he, by virtue of his manhood, and his very make and nature, ought to aim. It is beside the mark in another sense than that. As some one says, 'A rogue is a round-about fool.' No man ever secures that, and only that, which he aims at by any departure from the straight path of imperative duty. For if he gets some vulgar and transient titillation of appetite, or satisfaction of desire, he gets along with it something that takes all the gilt off the gingerbread, and all the sweetness out of the satisfaction. So that it is always a blunder to be bad, and every arrow that is drawn by a sinful hand misses the target to which all our arrows should be pointed, and misses even the poor mark that we think we are aiming at. Take these two thoughts with you—I will not dwell on them, but I desire to lay them upon all your hearts—all evil is sin, and every sin is rebellion against God, and a blunder in regard to myself.

II. And now I come to the second point of our text, and ask you to note the permanent record which every sin leaves.

I explained in the earlier part of my remarks that we have a case here of the thing that horrifies rhetoricians, but does not matter a bit to a prophet, the blending or confusing of two metaphors. The first of them—‘I have blotted out’—suggests a piece of writing, a book, or manuscript of some sort. And the plain English of what lies behind that metaphor is this solemn thought, which I would might blaze before each of us, in all our lives, that God’s calm and all-comprehensive knowledge and remembrance takes and keeps filed, and ready for reference, the whole story of our whole acts. There *is* a book. It is a violent metaphor, no doubt, but there is a solemn truth underlying it which we are too apt to forget. The world is groaning nowadays with two-volume memoirs of men that nobody wants to know anything more about. But every man is ever writing his autobiography with invisible but indelible ink. You have seen those old-fashioned ‘manifold writers’ in your places of business, and the construction of them is this: a flimsy sheet of tissue paper, a bit of black to be put in below it, and then another sheet on the other side; and the pen that writes on the flimsy top surface makes an impression that is carried through the black to the sheet below, and there is a duplicate which the writer keeps. You and I, upon the flimsinesses of this fleeting—sometimes, we think, futile—life, are penning what is neither flimsy nor futile, which goes through the opaque dark, and is reproduced and docketed yonder. That is what we are doing every day and every minute, writing, writing, writing our own biography. And who is going to read it? Well, God does read it now, and you will have to read it out one day, and how will you like that?

This metaphor will bear a little further expansion. Scripture tells us, and conscience tells us, what manner of manuscript it is that we are each so busy adding line upon line to. It is a ledger; it is an indictment. Our own handwriting puts down in the ledger our own debts, and we cannot deny our own handwriting when we are confronted with it. It is an indictment, and our own hand draws it, and we have to plead 'guilty,' or 'not guilty,' to it. Which, being translated into plain fact, is this—that there goes with all our deeds some sense and reality of responsibility for them, and that all our rebellions against God, and our blunders against self, be they great or small, carry with them a sense of guilt and a reality of guilt whether we have the sense of it or not. God has a judgment at this moment about every man and woman, based upon the facts of the unfinished biography which they are writing.

Mystical and awful, yet blessed and elevating, is the thought that nothing—*nothing*, ever dies; and that what was, is now, and always will be.

Amongst the specimens from the coal measures in a museum you will find slabs upon which the tiniest fronds of ferns that grew nobody knows how many millenniums since are preserved for ever. Our lives, when the blow of the last hammer lays them open, will, in like manner, bear the impress of the minutest filament of every deed that we have ever done.

But my metaphor will bear yet further expansion, for this autobiographical record which we are busy preparing, which is at once ledger and indictment, is to be read out one day. There is a great scene in the last book of Scripture, the whole solemn significance of which, I suppose, we shall not understand till we

have learned it by experience, but the truth of which we have sufficient premonitions to assure us of, which declares that at a given time, on the confines of Eternity, the Great White Throne is to be set, and the books are to be opened, and the dead are judged 'out of the books,' which, the seer goes on to explain, is 'according to their works.' The story of Esther tells us how the sleepless monarch in the night-watches sent for the records of the kingdom and had them read to him. The King who never slumbers nor sleeps, in that dawning of heaven's eternal morning, will have the books opened before Him, and my deeds will be read out. He and I will hear them, whether any else may hear or no. That is my second lesson.

III. The third is, that we have here suggested the darkening power of sin.

The prophet, as I said, mixes metaphors. 'I have blotted out as a cloud thy transgressions.' He uses two words for 'cloud' here; both of them mean substantially the same thing, and both suggest the same idea. When cloud fills the sky it darkens the earth, and shuts out the sunshine and the blue, it closes the petals of the little flowers, it hushes the songs of the birds. Sin makes for the sinning man 'an under-roof of doleful grey,' which shuts out all the glories above. Put that metaphor into plain English, and it is just this, 'Your sins have separated between you and your God, and your iniquities have hid His face from you that He will not hear.' It is impossible for a man that has his heart all stiffened by the rebellion of his will against God's, or all seething with unrestrained passions, or perturbed with worldly longings and desires, to enter into calm fellowship with God or to keep the thought of God clear before his mind. For

we know Him, not by sense nor by reason, but by sympathy and by feeling. And whatsoever comes in to disturb a man's purity, comes in to hinder his vision of God. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they'—and they only—'shall see God.' Whenever from the undrained swamps of my own passions and sensualities, or from the as malarious though loftier grounds of my own self-regard, be I student or thinker, or moral man, there rise up these light mists, they will fill the sky and hide the sun. On a winter's night you will see the Pleiades, or other bright constellations, varying in brilliancy from moment to moment as some invisible cloud-wrack floats across the heavens. So, brother, every evil thing that we do rises up and gets diffused through our atmosphere, and blots out from our vision the face of God Himself, the blessed Son.

Not only by reason of dimming and darkening my thoughts of Him is my sin rightly compared to an obscuring cloud; but the comparison also holds good because, just as the blanket of a wet mist swathing the wintry fields prevents the sunshine from falling upon them in blessing, so the accumulated effect of my evil doings and evil designs and thinkings and willings comes between me and all spiritual blessings which God can bestow, so that the very light of light, the highest blessings that He yearns to give, and we faint for want of possessing, are impossible even to His love to communicate until the cloud is swept away. So my sin darkens my soul, and separates me from the light of life.

But the metaphor carries with it, too, a suggestion of the limitations of the power of sin. For when the cloud is thickest and most obscuring it only hugs the

earth, and rises but a little way into the heavens; and far above it the blue is as blue, and the sunshine as bright, as if there were no mist or fog in the lower regions. Therefore, let us remember that, while the cloud must veil us from the light, the light is above it, and 'every cloud that veileth love' may some day be thinned away by the love it veils.

IV. That brings me to the last word of my text,—viz. the prophet's teaching as to the removal of the sin.

We have to carry both the metaphors together with us here. 'I have blotted out'—that is, as erasing from a book. 'I have blotted out as a cloud'—that is, the thinning away of the mist. The blurred and stained page can be cancelled. Chemicals will take the ink out. 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin'; and it, passed over all that foul record, makes it pure and clean. 'What I have written, I have written,' said Pilate in his obstinacy. 'What I have written, I have written,' wails many a man in the sense of the irrevocableness of his past. Brother! be not afraid. Christ can take away all that stained record, and give you back the page ready to receive holier words.

The cloud is thinned away. What thins the cloud? As I have said, the light which the cloud obscures, shining on the upper surface of it, dissipates it layer by layer till it gets down at last to the lowermost, and then rends a gap in it, and sends the shaft of the sun-beam through on to the green earth. And that is only a highly imaginative way of saying that it is the love against which we transgress that thins away the cloud of transgression, and at last, as the placid moon, by simply shining silently on, will sweep the whole sky clear of its clouds, dissipates them all, and leaves the



calm blue. God forgives. The ledger account—if I may use so grossly commercial a figure—is settled in full; the indictment is endorsed, ‘acquitted.’ He remembers the sins only to breathe into the child’s heart the assurance of pardon, and no obstacle rises by reason of forgiven transgression between the sinning man and the reconciled God.

Now, all this preaching of Isaiah’s is enlarged and confirmed, and to some extent the *rationale* of it is set before us in the great Gospel truth of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. Unless we know that truth, we may well stand amazed and questioning as to whether a righteous God, administering a rigorous universe, can ever pardon sin. And unless we know that by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, granted to our spirits, our whole nature may be remade and moulded, we might well be tempted to say, Ah! the Ethiopian cannot change his skin nor the leopard his spots. But Jesus Christ can change more than skin, even the heart and spirit, the inmost depths of the nature.

Now, brother, my text speaks of this great blotting out as a past fact. It is so in the divine mind with regard to each of us, because Christ’s great work has made reconciliation and atonement for all the sins of all the world. And on the fact that it is past is based the exhortation, ‘Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.’ God does not say, ‘Come back and I will forgive’; He does not say, ‘Return and I will blot out’; but He says, ‘Return, for I *have* blotted out.’ Though accomplished, the forgiveness has to be appropriated by individual faith. The sins of the world have been borne, and borne away, by the Lamb of God, but your sins are not borne away unless your hand is laid on this head.

If it is, then you do not need to say, 'What I have written is written, and it cannot be blotted out.' But as in the old days a monk would take some manuscript upon which filthy stories about heathen gods and foolish fables were written, and erase these to write the legends of saints, or perhaps the words of the Gospels themselves; so on our hearts, which have been scribbled all over with obscenities and follies, He will write His new best name of Love, and we may be epistles of Christ, written with the Spirit of the living God.

### HIDDEN AND REVEALED

'Verily thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour. . . . I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth; I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain: I the Lord speak righteousness, I declare things that are right.'—ISAIAH XLV. 15, 19.

THE former of these verses expresses the thoughts of the prophet in contemplating the close of a great work of God's power which issues in the heathen's coming to Israel and acknowledging God. He adores the depth of the divine counsels which, by devious ways and after long ages, have led to this bright result. And as he thinks of all the long-stretching preparations, all the apparently hostile forces which have been truly subsidiary, all the generations during which these Egyptian and Ethiopian tribes have been the enemies and oppressors of that Israel whom they at last acknowledge for the dwelling-place of God, and enemies of that Jehovah before whom they finally bow down, he feels that he has no measuring-line to fathom the divine purposes, and bows his face to the ground in reverent contemplation with that word upon his lips: 'Verily

Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.' It is a parallel to the apostolic words, 'O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.'

But such thoughts are but a half truth, and may very easily become in men's minds a whole error, and therefore they are followed by a marvellous section in which the Lord Himself speaks, and of which the whole burden is—the clearness and fulness with which God makes Himself known to men. True it is that there are depths inaccessible in the divine nature. True it is that there are mysteries unrevealed in the method of the divine procedure, and especially in that of the relation of heathen tribes to His gospel and His love. True it is that there are mysteries opened in the very word of His grace. But notwithstanding all this—it is also true that He makes Himself known to us all, that He declares righteousness, that He calls us to seek Him, and that He wills to be found and known by us.

The collocation of these two passages may be taken, then, as representing the two phases of the Divine Manifestation, the obscurity which must ever be associated with all our finite knowledge of God, and the clear sunlight in which blazes all that we need to know of Him.

I. After all revelation, God is hidden.

There is revelation of His Name in all His works. His action must be all self-manifestation. But after all it is obscure and hidden.

1. Nature hides while it reveals.

Nature's revelation is unobtrusive.

God is concealed behind second causes.

God is concealed behind regular modes of working (laws).

Nature's revelation is partial, disclosing only a fragment of the name.

Nature's revelation is ambiguous. Dark shadows of death and pain in the sensitive world, of ruin and convulsions, of shivered stars, seem to contradict the faith that all is very good; so that it has been possible for men to drop their plummet in the deep and say, 'I find no God,' and for others to fall into Manichæism or some form or other of dualism.

## 2. Providence hides while it reveals.

That is the sphere in which men are most familiar with the idea of mystery.

There is much of which we do not see the issue. The process is not completed, and so the end is not visible.

Even when we believe that 'to Him' and 'for good' are 'all things,' we cannot tell how all will come circling round. We are like men looking only at one small segment of an ellipse which is very eccentric.

There is much of which we do not see the consistency with the divine character.

We are confronted with stumbling-blocks in the allotment of earthly conditions; in the long ages and many tribes which are without knowledge of God; in the sore sorrows, national and individual.

We can array a formidable host. But it is to be remembered that revelation actually increases these. It is just because we know so much of God that we feel them so keenly. I suppose the mysteries of the divine government trouble others outside the sphere of reve-

lation but little. The darkness is made visible by the light.

3. Even in 'grace' God is hidden while revealed.

The Infinite and Eternal cannot be grasped by man.

The conception of infinity and eternity is given us by revelation, but it is not comprehended so that its contents are fully known. The words are known, but their full meaning is not, and no revelation can make them, known to finite intelligences.

God dwells in light inaccessible, which is darkness.

Revelation opens abysses down which we cannot look. It raises and leaves unsettled as many questions as it solves.

The telescope resolves many nebulae, but only to bring more unresolvable ones into the field of vision.

Now all this is but one side of the truth. There is a tendency in some minds to underrate what is plain because all is not plain. For some minds the obscure has a fascination, apart altogether from its nature, just because it is obscure. It is a noble emulation to press forward and 'still to be closing up what we know not with what we know.' But neither in science nor in religion shall we make progress if we do not take heed of the opposing errors of thinking that all is seen, and of thinking that what we have is valueless because there are gaps in it. The constellations are none the less bright nor immortal fires, though there be waste places in heaven where nothing but opaque blackness is seen. In these days it is especially needful to insist both on the incompleteness of all our religious knowledge, and to say that—

II. Notwithstanding all obscurity, God has amply revealed Himself.

Though God hides Himself, still there comes from

heaven the voice—‘I have not spoken in secret.’ Now these words contain these thoughts—

1. That whatever darkness there may be, there is none due to the manner of the revelation.

God has not spoken in secret, in a corner. There are no arbitrary difficulties made or unnecessary darkness left in His revelation. *We* have no right to say that He has left difficulties to test our faith. *He* Himself has never said so. He deals with us in good faith, doing all that can be done to enlighten, regard being had to still loftier considerations, to the freedom of the human will, to the laws which He has Himself imposed on our nature, and the purposes for which we are here. It is very important to grasp this. We have been told as much as *can* be told. Contrast with such a revelation the cave-muttered oracles of heathenism and their paltering double sense. Be sure that when God speaks, He speaks clearly and to all, and that in Christianity there is no esoteric teaching for a few initiated only, while the multitude are put off with shows.

2. That whatever obscurity there may be, there is none which hides the divine invitation or Him from those who obey it.

‘I have never said . . . seek ye Me in vain.’ Much is obscure if speculative completeness is looked for, but the moral relations of God and man are not obscure.

All which the heart needs is made known. His revelation is clearly His seeking *us*, and His revelation is His gracious call to us to seek Him. He is ever found by those who seek. They have not to press through obscurities to find Him, but the desire to possess must precede possession in spiritual matters. He is no hidden God, lurking in obscurity

and only to be found by painful search. They who 'seek' Him know where to find Him, and seek because they know.

3. That whatever may be obscure, the Revelation of righteousness is clear.

We have to face speculative difficulties in plenty, but the great fact remains that in Revelation steady light is focussed on the moral qualities of the divine Nature and especially on His righteousness.

And the revelation of the divine righteousness reaches its greatest brightness, as that of all the divine Nature does, in the Person and work of Jesus. Very significantly the idea of God's righteousness is fully developed in the immediately subsequent context. There we find that attribute linked in close and harmonious conjunction with what shallower thought is apt to regard as being in antagonism to it. He declares Himself to be 'a just (righteous) God and a Saviour.' So then, if we would rightly conceive of His righteousness, we must give it a wider extension than that of retributive justice or cold, inflexible aloofness from sinners. It impels God to be man's saviour. And with similar enlarging of popular conceptions there follows: 'In the Lord is righteousness and strength,' and therefore, 'In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified (declared and made righteous) and shall glory'—then, the divine Righteousness is communicative.

All these thoughts, germinal in the prophet's words, are set in fullest light, and certified by the most heart-moving facts, in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He 'declares at this time His righteousness, that He might Himself be righteous and the maker righteous of them that have faith in Jesus.' Whatever is dark, this is clear, that 'Jehovah our Righteousness' has

come to us in His Son, in whom seeking Him we shall never seek in vain, but 'be found in Him, not having a righteousness of our own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.'

If the great purpose of revelation is to make us know that God loves us, and has given us His Son that in Him we may know Him and possess His Righteousness, difficulties and obscurities in its form or in its substance take a very different aspect. What need we more than that knowledge and possession? Be not robbed of them.

Many things are not written in the book of the divine Revelation, whether it be that of Nature, of human history, or of our own spirits, or even of the Gospel, but these are written that we may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and believing, may have life in His name.

### A RIGHTEOUSNESS NEAR AND A SWIFT SALVATION

'Hearken unto Me, ye stout-hearted, that are far from righteousness: I bring near My righteousness; it shall not be far off, and My salvation shall not tarry.'—ISAIAH XLVI. 12, 13.

GOD has promised that He will dwell with him that is humble and of a contrite heart. Jesus has shed the oil of His benediction on the poor in spirit. It is the men who form the exact antithesis to these characters who are addressed here. The 'stout-hearted' are those who, being untouched in conscience and ignorant of their sin, are self-reliant and almost defiant before God. That temper is branded here, though, of course, there is a sense in which a stout heart is a priceless



possession, but that sort of stoutness of heart is best secured by the contrite of heart. Those who are far from righteousness are those who are not only sinful in act, but do not desire to be otherwise, having no approximation or drawing towards a nobler life, by aspiration or effort.

To such men God speaks, as in the tone of a royal proclamation; and what should we expect to hear pealing from His lips? Words of rebuke, warning, condemnation? No; His voice is gentle and wooing, and does not threaten blows, but proffers blessings: 'I will bring near My righteousness. It shall not be far off,' though the stout-hearted may be 'far from' it. Here we have a divine proclamation of a divine Love that will not let us away from its presence; of a divine Work for us that is finished without us; of an all-sufficient Gift to us.

I. A divine proclamation of a divine Love that will not let us away from its presence.

There is a great contest between God and man: man seeking to withdraw from God, and God following in patient, persistent love.

1. In general terms God keeps near us, however far away we go from Him.

Think of our forgetfulness of Him and His continual thought of us. Think of our alienated hearts and His unchanging love.

We cannot turn away His care, we cannot exhaust His compassion, we cannot alienate His heart. All men everywhere are objects of these, as in every corner of the world the sky is overhead, and all lands have sunshine.

What a picture of divine patience and placability that truth points for us! It shows the Father coming

after His prodigal son, and so surpasses even the pearl of the parables.

2. The special reference to Christ's work.

That work is the exhibition in manhood and to men of a perfect righteousness.

It is the implanting in the corrupt world of a new beginning. It is the clothing us with Christ's righteousness, for which we are forgiven and in which we are sanctified.

So Christ's work is God's coming to bring near His righteousness, and now 'it is nigh thee in thy mouth and in thy heart.'

II. A divine proclamation of a divine Work which is finished without us.

The divine righteousness and its consequence are here represented as being brought near while men are still 'stout-hearted.' We must feel the emphasis laid on '*I will bring near My righteousness,*' and the impression of merciful speed given by '*My salvation shall not tarry.*' The whole suggests such thoughts as these:—

The divine love is not drawn out by anything in us, but pours out on us, even while we are far off and indifferent to it. His bringing near of righteousness, and setting His salvation to run very swiftly side by side with it, originates in Himself. It is the self-impelled and self-fed flow of a fountain, and we need no pump or machinery to draw it forth.

The divine work is accomplished without man's co-operation.

'It is finished,' was Christ's dying cry. But what is finished?—Bringing the righteousness near. What still remains to be done?—Making it mine. And that is accomplished by faith.

It is mine if by faith I claim it as mine, and knit myself with Him who is righteousness and salvation for every man that they may be accessible to and possessed by any man.

A man may be far from righteousness though it is near him and all around him. Like Gideon's fleece, he may be dry when all is wet, or like some rock in a field, barren and sullen, while all around the corn is waving.

### III. The proclamation of an all-sufficient Gift.

Righteousness, salvation, glory, are here brought together in significant sequence. They are but several names for the same divine gift, looked at from different angles. A diamond flashes varying prismatic hues from its different facets.

That encyclopædical gift, which in regard to man considered as sinful brings pardon and a new nature 'in righteousness and holiness of truth,' brings deliverance from peril and from every form of evil and death, to him considered as exposed to consequences of sin both physical and moral, and a true though limited participation in the divine glory, even now, with the hope of entering into the blaze of it hereafter, to him as considered as made in the divine image and having lost it.

And all this wonderful triple hope, rapturous and impossible as it seems when we think of man as he is, and of each of ourselves as we each feel ourselves to be, is for us a sober certainty and a fact sufficiently accomplished, to give firm ground for our largest expectations if we hold fast by Jesus who brings that all-sufficient gift of God within reach of each of us. The divine patience and love follow us in all our wild wanderings, praying us 'with much entreaty that we should receive the gift.' Jesus, who is God's right-

eousness and love incarnate, beseeches us to take Him, and in Him righteousness, salvation, and glory.

## A RIVER OF PEACE AND WAVES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

‘Oh that thou hadst hearkened to My commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea.’—ISAIAH xlviii. 18.

### I. THE Wonderful Thought of God here.

This is an exclamation of disappointment; of thwarted love. The good which He purposed has been missed by man’s fault, and He regards the faulty Israel with sorrow and pity as a would-be benefactor balked of a kind intention might do. O Jerusalem! ‘how often would I have gathered thee.’ ‘If thou hadst known . . . the things that belong unto thy peace!’

### II. Man’s opposition to God’s loving purpose for us.

To have hearkened to His commandments would have enabled Him to let His kindness have its way.

It is not only our act contrary to God’s Law, but the source of that act in our antagonistic will, which fatally bars out the possibility of God’s intended good from us. It is ‘not hearkening’ which is the root of not doing.

That possibility of lifting up our puny wills against the all-sovereign, Infinite Will is the mystery of mysteries.

The fact that the mysterious possibility becomes an actuality in us is still more mysterious. If we could solve those two mysteries, we should be far on the way to solve all the mysteries of man’s relation to God, and God’s to man.

A will absolutely submitted to Him is His great ideal of human nature. And that ideal we all can thwart, and alas, alas! we all do. It is the deepest mystery; it is the blackest sin; it is the intensest folly.

Sin is negative as well as positive. Not to hearken is as bad as to act in dead opposition to.

### III. The lost good.

The great purpose of the divine Commandment is to show us, for our own sakes, the path that leads to all blessedness.

Peace and Righteousness, or, in more modern words, all well-being and all goodness, are the sure results of taking God's expressed Will as the guide of life.

These two are inseparable. Indeed they are one and the same fact of human experience, looked at from two points of view.

The force of the metaphor in both clauses is substantially the same. It suggests in both—Abundance—Continuity—Uninterrupted Succession. But regarded separately each has its own fair promise. 'As a river'—flowing softly, not stagnant—that suggests the calm and gentle flow of a placid and untroubled stream refreshing and fertilising. 'As waves of the sea,' these suggest greater force than 'river.' The image speaks of a righteousness massive and having power and a resistless swing in it. It is the more striking because the waves of the sea are the ordinary emblem of rebellious power. But here they stand as emblem of the strength of a submissive, not of a rebellious, will. In that obedience human nature rises to a higher type of strength than it ever attains while in opposition to the Source of all strength.

Contrast—'Whose waters cast up mire and dirt.'

IV. The lost good regained.

God has yet a method to accomplish His loving desire. Even those who have not hearkened may receive through Christ the good which they have sinned away. In Him is peace; in Him is Righteousness, which comes from faith. 'Hear, and your soul shall live.'

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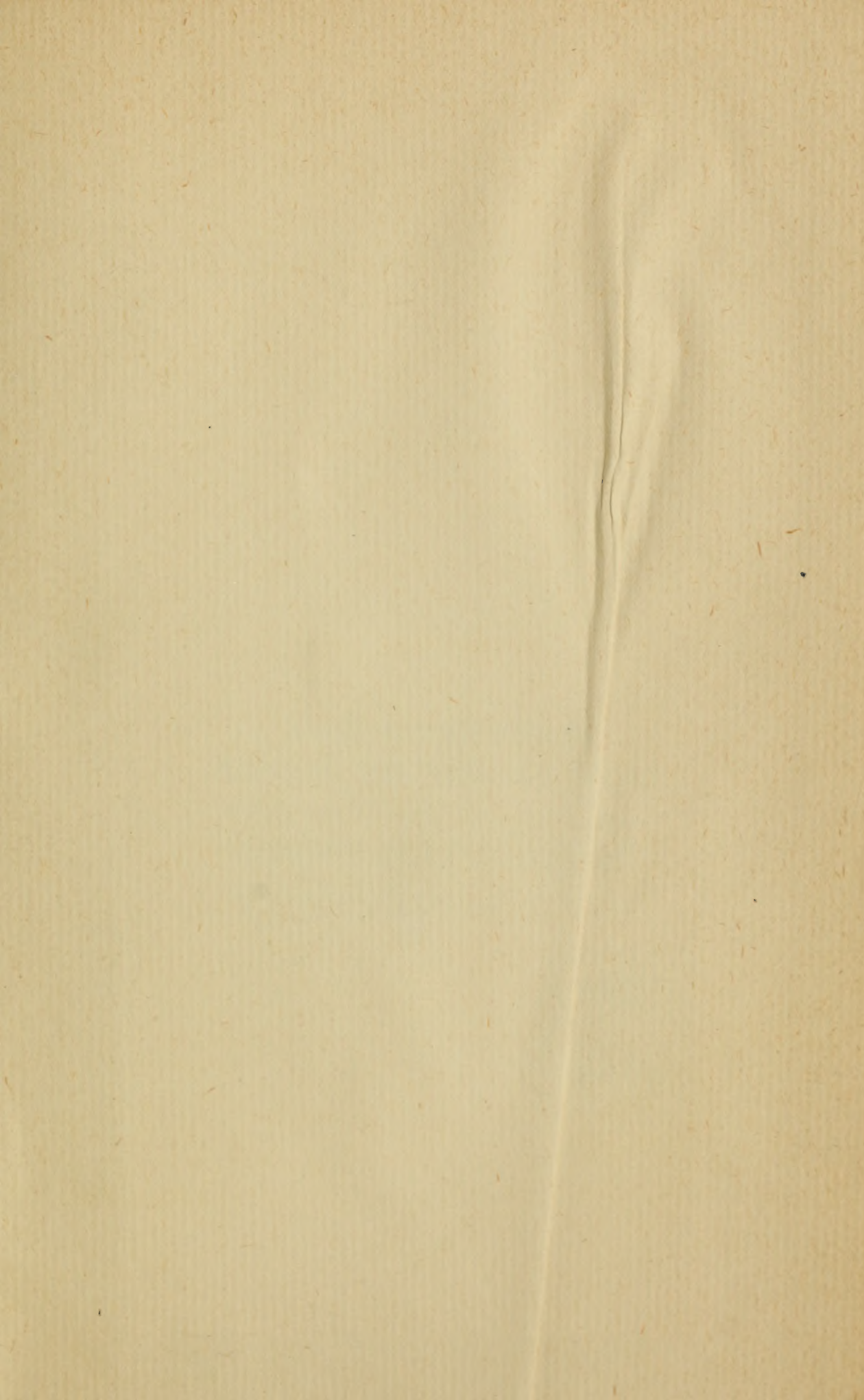
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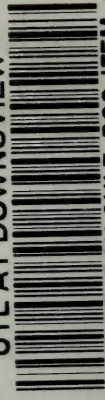
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